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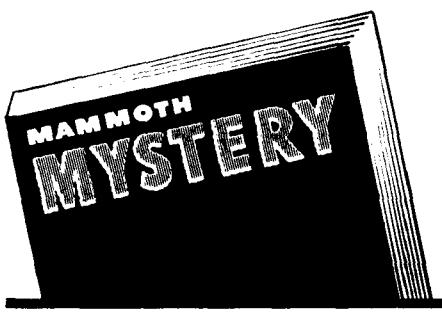

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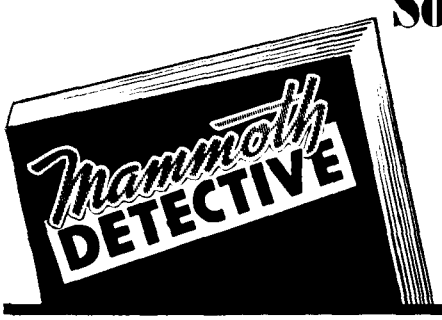

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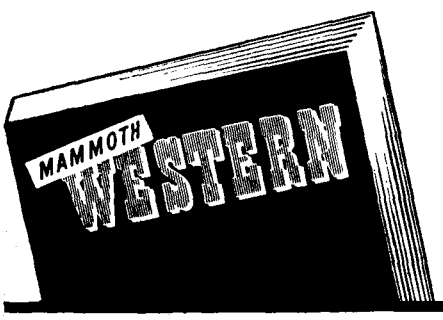

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THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK
By The Editor..... 6

DESCENT FROM THE CLOUDS
By June Lurie..... 79

SNAKES DON'T BITE
By R. Clayton..... 107

THE TALE OF A BIRD
By Gary Lee Horton..... 118

LITTLE GIANT
By Charles Reeves..... 119

SUPERNATURAL WONDERMENT
By Pete Bogg..... 132

VIGNETTES OF FAMOUS SCIENTISTS
By Alexander Blade..... 133

ROMANCE OF THE ELEMENTS
By Gordon MacLean..... 157

IMMORTAL DREAM
By Jon Barry..... 169

THE READER'S PAGE
By The Readers..... 170

THE ELECTRON MICROSCOPE
By Jerry Walsh..... 172

CAREER OF A CURSED CAR
By Vincent Gaddis..... 174

THE FOX GODDESS
By H. R. Stanton..... 177

THE SUNKEN TREASURE
By Sandy Miller..... 177

Front cover painting by Robert Gipson Jones illustrating a scene from "Forever Is Too Long."

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VOLUME 9 **NUMBER 2**

All Stories Complete

FOREVER IS TOO LONG (Short Novel—40,000)..... by Chester S. Geier..... 8
Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

Trevor thought he could find happiness in immortality, but his search was endless . . .

YOU CAN'T SCARE ME (Novelette—12,000)..... by Charles F. Myers..... 80
Illustrated by Brady

Once again Toffee had to come to Marc's aid—but it seemed she only made matters worse!

NOT AS PLOTTED (Short—5,800)..... by Guy Archette..... 108
Illustrated by Robert Fuqua

Plotting a story can be difficult—especially when the characters decide to take a hand.

HICKSON'S STRANGE ADVENTURE (Short—7,000)..... by E. K. Jarvis..... 120
Illustrated by Church

Hickson made a study of Bill Queen's mind, and found himself part of a weird adventure . . .

MAN OF TWO WORLDS (Novelette—13,900)..... by Robert Moore Williams... 134
Illustrated by Hinton

When a man finds himself living in two worlds his life can become unlivable—in both . . .

THE PRINCESS AND HER PIG (Short—6,000)..... by Richard S. Shaver..... 158
Illustrated by Rod Ruth

Only a sorcerer knew the little pig's name, so the princess became very curious . . .

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

WE'RE leading off this month with a new short novel by Chester S. Geier, "Forever Is Too Long." The mere fact that the story is by Geier should be news enough, but we can't help mentioning a little bit about it. The question of whether or not a man can be made immortal is a long standing one. Also, the advantages of living forever are quite obvious—even as the disadvantages are. Picture for yourself then, a man who suddenly finds himself endowed with eternal life. Naturally his first reaction is that of intense happiness, and he goes about making plans for his future, and that of his family. But then what would happen to this man as he watched his family grow old—eventually to die, while he stayed young and healthy. What would this man do? Could he erase from his mind all sense of emotion? Could he stay the cold, calculating scientist forever? And more than that—could he always be sure of his own superiority in a changing world? All these questions had to be answered before the immortal man could make a decision, a decision that promised to change the world far more than he could possibly envision . . . All of which is a bird's eye view of what is in store for you when you read this dramatic story. So go ahead!

AS WE promised last month, we're presenting a new adventure of Toffee the dream-girl, and Marc Pillsworth in this issue. You'll find the latest hilarious adventure on page 80, entitled, "You Can't Scare Me." We think that Mr. Myers is really getting into the groove with Toffee and Marc, and unless we miss our guess, you'll be deluging us with mail asking for more! (All of which is a gentle hint that we would like to know your reaction to the present Toffee adventure. If you are half as enthusiastic about it as we are, we can guarantee you'll see a lot more of these rip-tickling fantasies.) In this present story, Marc Pillsworth is plagued with thieves, murderers, and apparently ghosts. Marc didn't mind the thieves and murderers so much, but the thought of ghosts scared him. That's where Toffee stepped in, crying: "You Can't Scare Me!" And the risque little lady went on to prove it . . .

"NOT As Plotted," by Guy Archette is a short fantasy with a unique idea. A writer is having trouble with his latest story. The plot just doesn't seem to jell. He has his characters and background, but the main points in the story are too vague. He is about to give up when something happens to him, and he finds himself thrown into his own story as an innocent bystander—where his own characters take matters into their own hands and start *plotting* . . . There's a neat twist that we think you'll like.

E. K. JARVIS returns to our pages with an interesting short story, entitled, "Hickson's Strange Adventure." To tell you what the adventure is would be cheating, so we won't! But we will say that you'll find how even a scientist, whose beliefs are firmly established by long training, can be swayed overnight into becoming almost a mystic. Those of you with scientific training may smile a little at such a statement, but just ask yourself one question—how much do we know about the mind? That's answer enough right there! Of course, we're not trying to say that such an adventure as Hickson had is true, but on the other hand, who can say it isn't? . . .

YOU'LL be glad to see "Man Of Two Worlds" in this issue, since it is written by one of your top favorites, Robert Moore Williams. Bob writes this time of a man who lived in two separate and very complete worlds. If you think life can't become very complicated with such a situation, then read Bob's story. The man he writes about finally had to make a decision as to which world he preferred to live in *all* the time. How he arrived at his decision, and why, you'll find out when you read the story. Fair enough?

FOR those of you readers who are not acquainted with our "big sister" magazine *Amazing Stories*, we would like to say that you are missing a lot of swell entertaining reading. You'll find most of the writers you like so well in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES also appear in *Amazing*. And on top of that you'll get acquainted with the now famous "Shaver Mystery." (If you don't think it's famous, pick up the September 1946 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. All we have to say is that *Harper's* is just one of the "big-time" publications that are waking up to the fact that *Amazing* has something!) We don't ask you to believe the "cave" stories, but they *are* food for thought!

WHICH winds up shop for this issue. See you next month.

Rap.

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FOREVER IS TOO LONG

By Chester S. Geier

If you found you could live forever, what would you do—search for wealth, power, happiness . . . or death?

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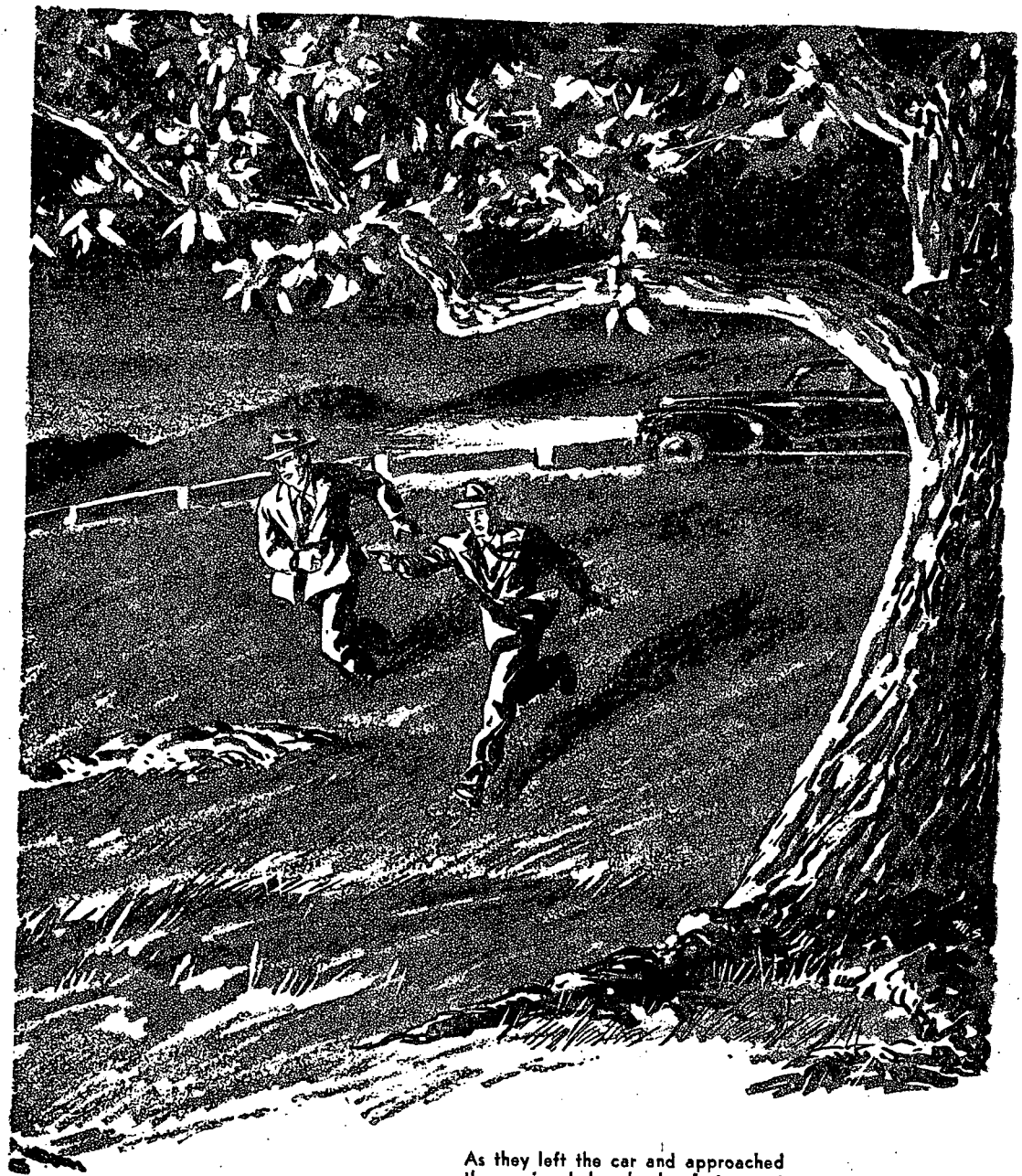

As they left the car and approached the gaping hole, clouds of steam at the edge of the crater eddied up . . .

TREVOR slowed the coupe as he approached the crest of the hill. He glanced into the rear view mirror, noted that the stretch of road slanting down behind was void of following cars. Deciding that the opportunity was too good to miss, he brought the coupe to a stop.

Dave Robbins, slumped in the seat beside Trevor, sat up with a start. "Huh! What's the matter, Stan?"

"One o'clock, and all's well," Trevor responded, fumbling in his pockets for a cigarette. "Just wanted a look at the

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scenery. This is my favorite spot, you know, and it's a wonderful night."

"Even without Annette to supply the necessary romance?" Robbins eyed Trevor cynically and stretched.

"Even without Annette," Trevor said. "She . . . well, she's swell, but it doesn't take a woman to help me appreciate the finer things of life." Trevor got the cigarette burning and leaned forward to gaze at the vista which spread on all sides below him.

It was early morning in the late spring of 1947. Rain had fallen a few hours before, but now the sky was clear, aglitter with the far-flung splendor of the stars. The silver crescent of the Moon added its illumination to the scene, etched the rolling fields of northwestern Illinois in shades of black and gray. A warm, soil-scented breeze blew in through the open windows of the car, and Trevor breathed it in deeply. His eyes took in the star-strewn sky and the shadowed fields, then turned to the cluster of lights far down the road ahead which marked the location of Oakton.

Trevor was conscious of Robbins' growing restlessness, but for the moment he ignored it as he lost himself in contemplation of the sweep and glory of the night. He could not quite understand the fascination which vast spaces held for him. Had Robbins pressed for an explanation of why Trevor regarded the hill as his favorite spot, Trevor realized he would not have been able to answer very clearly. All he knew was that the illimitable spread of the heavens gave him a sense of perspective, made him aware of how small and insignificant he was, how pretty his doubts and problems in comparison to the cosmic scheme. And always, afterwards, he came away refreshed.

Trevor took a final puff of his cigarette and tossed it out the window of the coupe. He felt better. He realized he'd been doing a bit too much thinking lately—about Annette, and his work at the college, and the years ahead. A bit too much thinking. The thoughts had got all tangled and mixed in his head. But now he found himself able to look at his affairs in something approaching logical order. He was 32. It was time he made up his mind about a lot of things. He was in the twilight of his youth. He had to stop thinking and begin doing—because there wasn't much time left for doing. . . .

DAVE ROBBINS stirred again. His voice cut into the silence, edged with impatience. "For God's sake, Stan, how much longer are you going to keep sitting here?"

"Not much longer. I just wanted to do some thinking."

"Oh. Is that what you stopped for?"

"In a way."

Robbins grinned in friendly derision. "Just another eccentric genius, huh? Boy, what I have to put up with. First that long-winded speech by our colleague, Professor Jepson, at the meeting in Norcross this evening, then a complete and utter silence by Professor Stanley Trevor, the brilliant young physics instructor from Oakton College. Seems all I do is swing from one extreme to the other."

"You could do worse," Trevor observed. "And as far as that goes, you didn't have to attend the meeting tonight."

"Oh, no. Neither did you. But you know as well as I do that old prexy Hallowell is keeping a bilious eye on us for advancement in our respective departments, and that every meeting, lecture, and musical we attend raises us a notch higher in his exalted opinions."

Trevor shrugged. "I was really in-

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terested in the meeting, but I guess what you said about Hallowell is true. We're still pretty young, you know, and old Hallowell probably wants to make sure we've sowed our wild oats before he gives us a boost."

"Yeah, damn his nasty old mind!" Robbins grunted. "Stan, what we need to do is pull something sensational. A really world-shaking discovery—you in physics and me in chemistry."

"Heh, heh!" Trevor mocked Abruptly he became serious. "I've been doing a lot of fooling around with the college cyclotron. Atomic power stuff. It may pan out—but probably not until I've got a beard way down to my bulging waistline."

"I know." Robbins sighed. "There isn't much time for private research what with classes, lectures, meetings, and all the rest of the formula and ritual with which a college instructor's life is complicated."

"I could think of worse ways to earn a living."

"Yeah? Well, anyway, I guess it's the same with all professions. You spend the best years of your life trying to get on top, and it's not until you're an old man that you finally do. And by that time you're too old to enjoy yourself."

"That's life, Dave."

"Isn't that the hell of it? Too bad a guy can't live to be 200 or so. Or forever. Forever!" Robbins caught at the word with sudden breathlessness. "Just imagine living forever. That would be something, eh, Stan?"

"I suppose it would."

"You suppose! I know damn well it would."

"Okay, then go mix yourself up an elixir and quit slobbering all over me."

"Huh! If an old wizard like Hausmann, with his knowledge of biochemistry, can't do it, what do you expect of me? I'm just two-bit instructor in a two-bit college."

Trevor chuckled. "Then confine yourself to two-bit thoughts, chum." His voice turned gentle. "Immortality would be nice. Darned nice. Forever in which to see all you want to see, and do all you want to do. . . ."

TREVOR shrugged with something approaching irritation at his flight of fancy, took a last look at the jewel-scattered sky, and reached out a forefinger to the starting switch of the coupe. His body jerked into rigidity. Something was coming down out of the sky, a thin, glowing streak that fell with flashing speed. And it was near—so near that the sound of its striking was audible as dull, faint *thump!*

Trevor whirled to Robbins. "Dave—did you see it?"

"I'll say! That was a meteorite, Stan—and it fell almost in our laps!"

Trevor completed his act of pressing the starting switch. "Might be something which would interest Chad Barton. The wild astronomer would never forgive us if we passed up the chance. The thing fell somewhere in that field, at the bottom of the hill, to the right." Trevor meshed gears, and the coupe slid into motion.

At the bottom of the hill, Trevor pulled over to the side of the road and followed Robbins from the car. He peered into the dark a moment, then pointed. "There it is! See that wisp of smoke?"

"That's steam," Robbins corrected. "It's hot, and the ground is wet. Say, you don't intend to go through all that mud?"

"What's a little mud?" Trevor bent and rolled up the cuffs of his trousers. "If you're going to be finicky, you can stay right here."

"The hell with you," Robbins re-

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joined. Hastily adjusting his own trousers, he followed after Trevor.

A short walk of some dozen yards brought them to the site of the meteor's fall. The force of its contact with the ground had made a hole five feet in diameter. Tendrils of steam arose from the hole, now beginning to thin.

"If it's a meteor, it isn't a very big one," Trevor decided.

"The point is," Robbins said, "what are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing right now. It's too hot to fool around with, and we aren't dressed for excavating. We'll return in the morning with all the proper equipment."

"But suppose someone else saw it fall and beats us to it?"

"Hardly likely. The meteorite was a small one. It couldn't have been seen by anyone farther away than we were."

They returned to the coupe. With a tire tool, they scraped the mud from their shoes, then Trevor slid back under the wheel, and they completed the remainder of the trip back to Oakton.

DAWN found Trevor and Robbins back at the scene, dressed in boots and jackets, and armed with shovels. The pit left by the impact of the meteor had not been disturbed. And as far as Trevor could see, judging from the footprints in the soil, he and Robbins had been the only persons so far to approach the spot.

"So far, so good," Robbins commented. He hefted his shovel. "Well, let's get to work. The thing wasn't big, and should have cooled off by now." Daylight showed him a tall, lean figure with a long, gaunt face. His bony cheeks and chin were dark with heavy stubble. His eyes were deep-set, fringed thickly with lashes, and startlingly blue.

"Not so fast," Trevor said. "Chad said something once about radioactive meteors, and I'm not taking any chances until I'm sure this one is of the common nickeliron variety. Some brats we'd raise if our genes and chromosomes got knocked around by radioactive emanations."

"No brats for me, thank you," Robbins rejoined. "Me, I'm batching it—and for good."

"Suit yourself," Trevor grunted. He stooped to open a leather instrument case which he had brought along. From a padded compartment in its interior, he lifted an electroscope. Holding the device in an extended hand, he leaned cautiously toward the pit. The gold leaves were charged and distended. Watching them intently, Trevor saw a faint flutter of movement. The minutes ticked away, his arm began to ache. Slowly, ever so slowly, the gold leaves of the electroscope drew together. Finally Trevor relaxed and stepped away from the pit.

"The thing's radioactive, all right. But from the rate of discharge of the 'scope, I'm certain it isn't radium, nor even uranium or thorium."

"Something else, eh?" Robbins whispered. He glanced up at the sky.

"The thing came from up there—out of space. We're not positive we know all the elements here on Earth. But from out of space. . . . Stan, we may have stumbled on something big!"

"Maybe." Trevor eyed the pit, frowning in thought. "Guess we can take a chance on digging it up. The thing's only weakly radioactive. But we'd better be careful just the same."

They plied their shovels eagerly, in turn. The sun climbed higher into the sky and became warm. A mound of earth was growing beside the pit. Trevor and Robbins shed their jackets, rolled up the sleeves of their shirts. The periods of rest grew more frequent.

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Both men were exhausted, bathed in perspiration. Finally, Robbins released a shout. Tall as he was, his head was below the level of the pit.

"Hit it! Stan—I hit it!"

Trevor jumped to the pit's edge. "Might be just a rock. Use the blade of your shovel. See if you can pry it up."

"It's not a rock, Stan. Metal. Rough and jagged." Robbins got the blade of the shovel under it, applied leverage, and the object pulled free.

"Don't touch it," Trevor cautioned.

"How are we going to get it out?"

"Get it on the shovel, then lift is as high as you can."

Trevor reached into the pit. As Robbins followed his directions and raised the meteorite on the shovel, Trevor grasped the handle and lifted it out the rest of the way. He dumped the meteorite on the ground. Robbins climbed from the pit, and together they examined their find.

The meteorite was a gnarled, craggy mass the size of a man's head. It was obviously metallic, and such of its surface as protruded through its coating of sand and clay showed a dull greenish-black. It still radiated a faint heat.

"Well, there's our pie," Robbins remarked. "Still intend to make Chad Barton a present of it?"

"I think we'd better wait a while," Trevor answered slowly. "There are indications that we've got something here. We'd better make sure just what before we do anything else."

"Keep it dark, too, eh?"

"That might not be a bad idea." Trevor stretched aching muscles, then reached for the shovel. "Come on, Dave, we've got to get this hole filled up."

CHAPTER II

THE chapel bell was tolling five o'clock as Trevor hurried across the campus quadrangle toward the rugged Gothic outlines of Davis Hall, which housed the chemistry department. A textbook slipped from beneath his arm, and he stopped to retrieve it with a mutter of impatience. He acknowledged the salutations of a group of passing students with a brief nod. Two days had passed since he had last seen Dave Robbins, and as Robbins was making an examination of the meteorite, Trevor was anxious to know what the other had learned. A sudden deluge of curricular matters had kept Trevor otherwise occupied.

Trevor found Robbins bent over a crucible in his crowded, tiny laboratory in the basement of Davis Hall. Robbins looked haggard and disgusted.

Trevor felt a small thrill of dismay as he took in the expression on Robbins' face. "What's the matter, Dave? No results?"

Robbins shook his tousled, dark head. "None, damn it! I've tried every analytical procedure known, but the stuff baffles identification either as an element or a compound. We've got something, all right, but just what, I wouldn't know to save my life." Robbins turned to the table behind him and picked up a small, lead-lined wooden box.

Trevor stared at the box in consternation. "Good Lord, what happened to the thing? There was a big chunk of it!"

"Yeah, but that was just a conglomerate of stone and nickeliron. The important part was just a fragment the size of my thumb, imbedded almost in the center of the larger mass. I can tell you I had a time getting it out."

Trevor took the box from Robbins, and peered cautiously into its interior. Robbins had obviously used a major portion of the fragment, for all that was left now was a rough cuboid, less

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than an inch square. It was a soft, silvery blue, faintly luminous in the shadowed confines of the box. Gazing at it, Trevor felt the chill touch of awe. Here, he thought, was a bit of the unknown that lay beyond the world—something so alien it defied understanding.

Robbins spoke softly, as though sensing Trevor's mood. "The thing is radioactive—but in no way like radium or thorium. That is, it has the properties of radioactivity. But, Stan, it may not be radioactivity at all. It may be some condition of matter our science hasn't encountered as yet."

"I think what we've found is a new element," Trevor said musingly. "Or at least, if not a new element then a new and hitherto undiscovered atomic form of an element already known. One of the elements in the radioactive group, most likely." Trevor's eyes lighted suddenly. "Say—the cyclotron! That's it! Dave, what I'm going to do is subject the fragment to neutron bombardment in the cyclotron. If this is actually a new atomic form of a known radioactive element, the bombardment process may furnish us with a clue to its identity."

"Maybe. Anyway, Stan, the thing is your pigeon. I wasted two days fooling with it, and I've fallen behind in my work. If you turn up anything, be sure to let me know."

"You can bet your hide I will!" Trevor waved a hand and hurried from the building, the wooden box tucked under his arm. As he pulled open the outer door, he collided with the figure of a girl.

"Oh—why, Stan!" It was Annette Buell.

"Hello, angel!" Trevor greeted. "What are you doing in this neck of the woods? Not two-timing me, I hope."

ANNETTE laughed. "Stan, don't be silly. Dad and I are having a small dinner party tonight, and I wanted to ask you over. I went to your office, but you weren't there. Then I thought of Dave's lab—and here you are." Annette Buell wrinkled her small nose at Trevor as if to imply that his being there wasn't as important to her as it really was. She was short, with a suggestion of plumpness about throat and cheeks. Her features had the prettiness of complete femininity rather than physical perfection. She wore a tan sportcoat and a vivid yellow scarf, which emphasized the golden undertones of her light brown hair and made her liquid brown eyes seem darker than they really were.

Trevor nibbled his lower lip in indecision. The temptation to accept Annette's invitation was strong. But eagerness to test the meteoric fragment pulled at him almost like hunger.

Trevor shook his head reluctantly. "Annette, I'd like to be there tonight, but I'm working on something that may turn out big. I'll need all the free time I have for a while."

Disappointment twisted Annette's face almost like pain. She forced the expression away as quickly as it had come. Her smile a moment later took effort, but it was still very much a smile. "I understand. Well, anyway, Stan, think you could spare a few minutes to walk me back home?"

Annette lived in a large frame house just a few blocks from the campus. Her widowed father, Jason Buell, was dean of the English department.

"I'm pretty sure I could," Trevor replied. He guided her down the stairs to the walk, wanting to hold her tightly to ease the hurt he knew his refusal had caused, but too deeply ingrained with the dignity and decorum expected of college instructors to do so—at least

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in public. Annette was swell, he thought. Swell. He knew his feelings went much deeper than that, and he cursed the need for dignity and decorum which was beginning to affect even his thinking. He loved her, he told himself defiantly. He felt better. He even got himself to admit that he loved her terribly—so much it hurt. He felt still better. . . .

THE college cyclotron was located in a specially constructed sub-basement beneath Putnam Hall, the building which housed the physics department. It was a small one, built primarily for the creation of tiny quantities of radioactive isotopes by students studying elementary atomic engineering. Members of the physical and chemical branches of the Oakton College faculty frequently used the cyclotron in connection with their private researches. Trevor was relieved when he learned from the night watchman of the building that no one was using the apparatus that evening.

He signed his name in the night book, and clutching the box containing the meteoric fragment, took the automatic elevator down to the sub-basement. Switching on the lights, he quickly stripped off coat and vest, then donned a bulky suit of protective armor. He placed the meteoric fragment upon the target within the reaction chamber of the cyclotron, made adjustments on the control panel, and finally turned on the power. He intended to use low velocity neutrons first, gradually increase the speed of emission until more or less definite reactions were obtained.

The apparatus hummed faintly as the magnetic fields built up, whirling the neutrons around with ever increasing speed. As terminal velocity was reached, a red light glowed on the control panel, signalling that the first of a stream of neutrons was striking the target.

Trevor waited tensely for the warning buzz of the timing indicator. As it came, he acted instinctively, shut off the power. He watched the needle of a dial on the control panel. It remained motionless. Fission was not taking place, nor for that matter any other reaction as shown by the instruments.

Trevor changed the adjustments, this time using a higher neutron velocity. Still no results. He tried again. And again.

Trevor's nerves were drawn to shrieking tightness as the straining minutes ticked away and the velocities mounted to incredible figures. His clothing was humid and clinging inside his protective armor. At last he dared try no further. The minimum safety factor of the cyclotron had been reached.

Wearily, he shut off the power for the last time. He opened the thick, tiny door of the reaction chamber, reached in with a pair of cadmium tongs. He placed the fragment upon a nearby table and began dully to divest himself of his armor.

Nervous exhaustion had blunted Trevor's thought processes. He forgot the fragment was alien, and therefore possessed of alien properties. He forgot it might not react to neutron bombardment as most Earthly substances react either at once or not at all. And because he did not take the proper precautions, it happened.

Bombardment within the cyclotron *had* affected the meteoric fragment. But in such fashion that its alien qualities made it react like a time bomb.

There was no warning. One moment the fragment rested, inertly and quietly, on the table where Trevor had placed it. The next it exploded soundlessly in a great flare of blue-tinged light.

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The strange radiation struck Trevor's body like a physical blow. Agony flamed through him as though each and every atom of his being had been subjected to a split-second of individual torment. Then the utter blackness of the spaces between the stars swooped down to engulf him.

CHAPTER III

LIGHT filtered slowly through the blackness, became a huge yellow moon that shone eye-hurtingly in a purple sky. He was sitting on a mountaintop with Annette, who, for some reason he could not understand, was crying in great, wracking sobs. Suddenly, the yellow moon tumbled down out of the sky—straight toward them. Down, down, larger and ever larger—and then the scene was gone, and he was digging feverishly under a meteoric boulder with a shovel the size of a spoon, while Dave Robbins, pinned beneath the boulder, implored him to hurry. Without warning, the boulder abruptly exploded, and he was hurtling through space in his coupe—directly toward a raging blue-white sun that reached for him with hungry tentacles of flame.

Trevor awoke. For long seconds he surveyed with bewilderment the severe white room upon which he had opened his eyes. Then understanding came to him. A hospital. He was in a hospital.

The knowledge sent his mind probing backward for some reason which would explain his presence here. In a moment he had it. The meteoric fragment. The test in the cyclotron. The strange, brilliant, and noiseless explosion.

Trevor's thoughts turned anxiously to himself. What had happened to him? Obviously, the explosion had knocked him unconscious. But what other effects had it had upon his body? Tensely, he sifted his sensations, analyzed them. He became aware first of all that he was hot—extremely so. His body seemed internally to be on fire. Yet he was not perspiring as was common in fever. His skin felt rough and dry—parched as though all moisture had been drained from it.

The thought made him suddenly conscious of an appalling thirst. The desire for water came to him with overwhelming urgency. At the moment he could not think of anything he had ever wanted more in all his life.

Trevor shifted about on the bed with growing impatience. Once he attempted to raise himself up on an elbow, but the effort proved to be too much for him. He relaxed back upon the pillow, accepting dully the fact that he'd have to wait until somebody came.

After aeons, it seemed, the sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears. The crisp, white-garbed figure of a nurse moved into his line of vision.

"Water," Trevor croaked.

He heard a soft, comforting murmur. A cool hand reached down to touch his forehead. Then equally cool fingers were laid upon his wrist. Faintly and almost inaudibly there came to him the ticking of a watch.

The nurse left. Satisfied that he had been noticed, Trevor relaxed upon the bed. A short time later, the nurse returned. There was a clink of glassware, then the musical gurgling of poured water.

"Drink it slowly." The nurse raised Trevor's head, held the glass to his lips. He would have drained it in great, yearning swallows, but her hand restrained him.

"More, please," Trevor requested.

The nurse shook her head firmly. "Not for a while. Too much all at once wouldn't be good for you. Doctor Allbright will be in soon to check up on you. We'll see what he says."

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TREVOR closed his eyes, savoring the traces of moisture that remained in his mouth. He thought ruefully that he had never expected to encounter a time when so commonplace a thing as water would assume such importance. He anticipated the arrival of Dr. Allbright if for no other reason than that he would be allowed another drink.

He lay quietly, listening to the crisp rustling of the nurse's uniform as she moved about the room. Then came the awaited sound of briskly approaching footfalls.

The footfalls stopped at the bed. Trevor found himself looking up at the round, ruddy face of a white-clad man who was obviously the Dr. Allbright the nurse had mentioned.

"Awake, eh?" Allbright said. "Fine!" His plump features seemed to radiate cheerfulness and hope. He had fine sandy hair, badly thinned, which was brushed carefully over the top of his shining pate.

"Water," Trevor whispered.

The voice of the nurse followed softly. "I gave him a glass a moment ago, Dr. Allbright. He's running a fever."

Allbright nodded and produced a thermometer which he thrust into Trevor's mouth. He withdrew it after some seconds, studied the reading. Some of the cheerfulness and hope went out of his face. What remained seemed kept there by effort.

"How do you feel?" Allbright asked.

"Hot and thirsty and rather weak," Trevor said. "But mostly thirsty."

"Do you feel capable of talking a little?"

"I'm sure I could manage it."

"Fine. Now look—just what happened to you? The night watchman of Putnam Hall down at the college found you unconscious in the atomic engineering laboratory. He wasn't able to make any explanation beyond the fact that he grew worried about you when you failed to leave the building."

Trevor hesitated, uncertain as whether or not to divulge the story of the meteoric fragment. Finally he decided that it would be in his own best interest to reveal the facts to Allbright. He did so, passing lightly over the finding of the meteorite, but concentrating upon the test of the fragment in the cyclotron and the strange explosion which had so tardily followed.

Allbright digested the information in thoughtful silence, rubbing the tip of a forefinger against his cheek. There was uncertainty in his attitude, as though he had run up against something new in his experience and did not quite know what course of action to take.

"Water?" Trevor said again.

Allbright nodded his balding head abruptly. "It's the least I can do." He gestured to the nurse, watched gravely while Trevor drank. He seemed to lose himself in thought again. Finally he asked:

"You're sure you feel no pain?"

"None," Trevor said. "I'm just hot and thirsty."

"You're running a bad fever. I've never encountered anything like it. That blast of radiation—" Allbright took his lip between his teeth as though biting the words off. "Try to rest," he told Trevor after a moment. "I'll be back later on." He turned to the nurse. "Let him have water at intervals."

"Nothing else, Doctor?"

"I'd hesitate to suggest anything. It's an unusual type of fever. Not germ induced. The usual counteractives might do more harm than good."

Allbright left. Trevor stared up at the ceiling, his thoughts somber. Was this—the end? So soon? He envisioned Annette, and suddenly, achingly, he told himself he didn't want to

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die. He closed his eyes against the fear that formed tight and cold within him. Yet a little while, he prayed silently. Yet a little while. . . .

The sunlight paled. Shadows grew and deepened within the room. Trevor drifted off into slumber—a strange slumber that was very heavy and dreamless. And while he slept, the fever—which was really a very minor symptom accompanying a much more serious physical disturbance—reached its climax.

Trevor's metamorphosis was complete.

He had undergone a far-reaching and radical change—one that had affected each and every individual cell of his body. Outwardly he remained the same. But inwardly he had become something not quite human.

TREVOR opened his eyes to the glare of sunlight. He lay still, recalling memories of the preceding day. Surprise gripped him at the fact that he was still alive. He remembered his fear of dying with the poignancy of something that had been very real. His prayer, it seemed, had not been in vain.

He probed the sensations of his body gingerly. The first thing of which he became aware was that his previous feeling of extreme hotness was gone. The temperature of his skin seemed normal enough. He was still thirsty, but otherwise he felt as well as he'd ever had.

Trevor marveled over his sense of well-being. It seemed incredible that he could have escaped the strange blast of radiation without some kind of permanent injury. He wondered suddenly if his recovery was only temporary, illusory. Perhaps he really had been injured, but in such a way as would manifest itself only later.

Trevor left off further speculation as the nurse entered the room. She seemed mildly astonished to find him awake.

"Good morning," she greeted. She touched his forehead. "Why, your fever's gone!"

"For good, I hope," Trevor responded. He grinned. "If it isn't getting too monotonous, may I have a glass of water?"

The nurse smiled back at him. "If you promise not to drown yourself, I'll leave you a jug and a glass by your bed."

"I promise."

The nurse left on her errand. When presently she returned, Trevor saw she was accompanied by Dr. Allbright.

Allbright seemed bursting with curiosity. He hurried over to Trevor, checked his temperature and pulse. "Well! You've come around amazingly. Yesterday I was all prepared to write you down as a loss. I looked in on you last night while you were sleeping. Your temperature had gone up ten points. But now you're almost back to normal."

Trevor chuckled. "Almost is right. I won't be completely normal until my stomach is filled."

"I'll have that taken care of," Allbright assured. He eyed Trevor a moment. "Do you feel up to receiving visitors?"

"That would depend on the visitors."

"There's a Miss Annette Buell and a David Robbins who have been trying repeatedly to see you."

"Doc, if you don't let them in, I'm going to have a relapse. But first of all I'd like to have a shave and something to eat."

DAVE ROBBINS was the first person Trevor saw. Robbins bounded into the room, his gaunt features anxious and strained. At sight of Trevor, propped up on the bed, washed and shaved, and wearing an expression of

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serenity which bespoke a contented stomach and a sound body, Robbins stopped short. His mouth worked like a fish yanked suddenly out of water.

"Why, Stan, damn your hide, I thought—"

"Y e a h," Trevor drawled. "You thought they had me all nicely pickled and laid out."

"Not quiet that, but something almost as bad." Robbins pulled up a chair and sat down. "All right, Stan, what happened? There's a rumor that you had an accident with the cyclotron, but knowing you were making a test of that stuff from the meteorite, I'm sure it goes deeper than that."

Trevor recounted what had taken place, concluding with his awakening in the hospital and the disappearance of his strange fever. Robbins ran his fingers through his perpetually tousled hair, frowning. When he spoke, it was more to himself than to Trevor.

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all. If there had been just that explosion of light and nothing else, it would have been all right. But that resulting fever—" He broke off abruptly, looking confused. "Cheerful cus, aren't I? But, Stan, you're sure you feel all right?"

"Just about as well as ever."

"Yeah, but who knows there might not have been effects which haven't shown themselves as yet? We should never have fooled around with that meteorite in the first place. It was too big for us."

"Maybe. But it was worth a try. You'll recall the way you sounded off about us having to make some important discovery to get ahead."

"Yeah, I guess I stuck my neck out. But, Stan, if something had happened to you. . . ."

"You'd have been pleased as hell, no doubt."

"Sure. You make me sick most of the t i m e anyway." But Robbins grinned, and Trevor grinned back. They were well aware that their taunts and sarcasm were nothing more or less than masculine camouflage for feelings that were deep and sincere.

After Robbins left, Trevor received visits in turn from Chad Barton and old Matthew Hallowell. Barton was short and red-haired, and except when seated before the eyepiece of the college refractor, in a state of continuous excitement. It was because of this excess of nervous energy that he had been tagged with the appellation "the wild astronomer." Old Hallowell was thick-set and grizzled. His usual gruffness was lacking as he spoke of Trevor's near-martyrdom to science and wished him a speedy recovery. To neither did Trevor explain what had actually happened to him. He told merely a vague story of a minor mishap occuring in connection with his research.

Annette came that evening. One of Trevor's precious visitors had apparently informed her of Trevor's recovery, for she was radiant with joy.

"Stan!" She touched his cheek. "I'm so glad."

He caught her hand. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't come."

"As if anything could keep me away!" Annette shed her coat, and after first industriously arranging Trevor's pillows, sat down in the chair beside the bed.

Trevor asked, "Were you worried when . . . when you first heard about it?"

"Worried?" she grinned. "I almost blew my top. I tried to get in to see you yesterday, but they told me you couldn't be disturbed."

"I was in conference," Trevor said, grinning back. He caught her hand again. "Annette, I've been thinking.

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. . . You see, I've been wanting to ask you to marry me, but I thought I'd better wait until I made myself noticed some way—an important discovery, or maybe a more responsible position on the faculty. Anyway, after what happened, I decided it was possible to wait too long—until it was too late. And . . . well, fame and advancement aside, I'm not going to wait any more. Will you marry me?"

"Yes—fame and advancement aside."

CHAPTER IV

TREVOR pulled his sedan over to the side of the road as he crested the hill. Lighting a cigarette, he settled back into the seat. He gazed from the clustered lights of Oakton to the star-spattered sky, and memory came to him of another night, eight years before, when he and Dave Robbins had sat in almost this identical spot and glimpsed the fall of a meteorite. The wings of nostalgia brushed him lightly.

Eight years, Trevor thought. Eight years had added many new lights to Oakton, but the night was the same. The night had not changed, nor, Trevor decided, had its fascination for him waned. He felt, as he had felt many times before, that some special kind of symbolism was involved—something that made the night meaningful for him, that tied them together, made them one. But as always he found himself unable to determine just what it was.

His mind went back over those eight years. He recalled his experiment with the meteorite, and the strange blast of radiation from which miraculously he had escaped unscathed. There was his marriage to Annette, his advancement to dean of the physics department. There was Betty, first a tiny bundle of vociferous plumpness, now a growing girl of seven.

They had been happy years. He was forty now, but he knew none would have guessed it to look at him. He had aged scarcely at all. People, in fact, frequently congratulated him on the remarkable way in which he was keeping his youth. It worried him a little at times, though he was not by nature introspective or sensitive. Annette was still pretty and sweet, but she seemed to be paying more and more attention to diets and beauty treatments, and occasionally she frowned in the mirror at her face. Dave Robbins was still lean and gangling, but his bony shoulders had become stooped, and gray powdered the temples of his lank, black hair. And Chad Barton, even away from his refractor, was much more quiet than he used to be. It took the stimulus of liquor to bring out the Chad of other days.

These, Trevor reflected, were showing their growing burden of years. And suddenly he felt a twinge of conscience, as though guilty of some shortcoming. They were swell people, Annette, Dave, and Chad. The finest. It wasn't fair to them that he should evince the effects of time in less measure than they.

But, Trevor realized, the hand of time is felt by all men. He was merely an exception that proved the rule. Sooner or later, he knew, the years would catch up with him. Sooner or later his mirror, too, would show the deepening or wrinkles, the graying of hair. This was something that could not be avoided . . . something that came inevitably to all men.

The cigarette burned down to Trevor's fingers, rousing him from his reverie. He tossed it through a lowered side window and glanced at his watch. Almost eight. Almost time for dinner. He smiled a little to himself. It was going to be a special dinner. This time

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he hadn't overlooked the fact that today was his birthday as he'd had a number of occasions in the past. Annette hadn't hoodwinked him by sending him out on an errand in the car. And even if he had been fooled, little Betty's ill-suppressed excitement alone would have appraised him of the fact that something was up.

Still smiling, he started the sedan and sent it rolling toward the lights of Oakton. Annette, he thought, had had more than enough time to get everything ready.

THERE was nothing about the house to suggest anything unusual afoot. Trevor parked his sedan in the driveway and rang the doorbell. He could have used his key, but he wanted Annette to have ample warning of his arrival.

Annette opened the door. She tried to look casual, though she didn't succeed. "It's about time you got back."

"Thought so myself," Trevor grinned. He removed his hat and coat and hung them in the closet. "What's on for dinner?"

"Oh, the usual. Soup and stuff." Annette wrinkled her nose and took his arm.

The dining room was dark. When Annette switched on the lights, there they were—Dave, Chad, all the rest—just as Trevor had suspected they would be. They crowded around him, thumping his back, shaking his hand.

"Happy birthday!" It was a noisy chorus, prearranged but ragged, as old as the calendar itself, yet somehow ageless.

Annette herded the assemblage back into their seats, and then dinner was brought in. "Soup and stuff" was an eight course meal topped off by a huge birthday cake with forty candles. Trevor failed to blow out all the candles, much to the delight of his guests.

Later, they gathered in the living room. Full stomachs had taken the edge from their enthusiasm, and though they tried to enter into the spirit of the games which Annette had planned, it was plain to see that their attempts were half-hearted and increasingly self-conscious. The years had caught up as they always did. Annette did not force the issue. Like the wise hostess she was, she quickly brought up a barrage of drinks to combat the growing apathy.

One of the ladies present had been a 'vision singer before she took up the staid—and vastly more secure—existence as the wife of a college professor. She sat down at the piano and began to sing. Her figure had thickened, and her chin had doubled on itself, but her voice was still sweet and true. With the attention of their wives focused on the singer, the male guests seized the opportunity and applied themselves industriously to their drinks. The party began gradually to take on the brittle, artificial gaiety which liquor seems to induce.

Trevor sat on the sofa between Annette and Dave Robbins. Annette was engrossed in the singing, nodding her head, tapping her foot in time. Dave Robbins stared moodily into the amber depths of his highball.

Trevor nudged Robbins unobtrusively with his elbow. "What's the matter, Dave? Party wearing on you?"

"Not exactly. It's just that birthdays always sort of get me down."

"I think I know what you mean." Trevor nodded slowly. "We aren't kids anymore."

"Yeah. It takes a kid to enjoy birthday parties. But after you reach a certain age . . . well, each birthday is that much less sand in the hour-glass. One year less to live, one step closer to

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the old man with the scythe. . . ."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Dave."

"Why shouldn't I? It's no fun to grow old."

"No, but we aren't old yet. Life, they say, begins at forty."

ROBBINS took a swallow of his highball and snorted. "They're wrong. They just say that to fool you. Life starts ending at forty, Stan. Don't let anyone try to tell you otherwise."

"What are you two gossiping about?" Annette had turned and was now gazing at them with twinkling eyes.

"Old age," Trevor answered. "Dave considers it a nuisance and a bore."

"It certainly is," Annette said. "Makes it hard for a girl to keep up appearances." She nodded at Chad Barton who, glass in one hand, seated himself on the arm of the sofa, next to Robbins.

"Stan doesn't have to worry about appearances," Robbins put in. "He's keeping his very well, thank you."

Annette grinned. "The old miser! He's hoarding them, that's what he's doing."

Trevor smiled tolerantly, though a strong sense of discomfort rose within him. Annette still grinned, but it seemed that the twinkle in her eyes had gone. Something else looked out of them—something that might have been envy.

Dave Robbins surveyed Trevor's face and hair, then looked away. His mouth looked a little sullen, faintly bitter.

Chad Barton emptied his glass in one long swallow, placed it on a nearby table. Though seated, he swayed a little. His face was flushed, his eyes a trifle glazed.

"Old miser!" Chad said suddenly. He fixed Trevor with an unblinking, owlish gaze. "Keeping 'pearances all right." Chad leaned slowly forward. "Say . . . say, Stan, why don't you grow old?" Chad's voice was thick, flatly demanding, pausing the merest instant before each word.

It was the sort of question you could laugh off, dismiss lightly with a bit of clever repartee. Coming especially from a man who was more than a bit drunk, it was something to which you paid hardly no attention at all. But Chad Barton gave the question a solemnity, a sort of ponderous emphasis, which made it somehow vital and all-important.

Trevor felt an urgent need of some answer, however banal, but for the moment he could think of nothing to say. Dismay and confusion had robbed him of speech. He was acutely conscious of the combined stares of Annette, Dave, and Chad—particularly those of Annette and Dave. The two were gazing at him intently, with a startled awareness, as though seeing him for the first time.

IT WAS Annette who came to Trevor's rescue. "That's a silly question to ask Chad," she accused. "You've had too many drinks."

Chad nodded gravely. "Too many drinks." He hiccuped. "But it's true just the same. People . . . people are starting to talk. Saying it's strange—mighty strange."

Annette forced a smile. "Don't pay any attention to them, Chad. They're just jealous." She stood up with a quick, jerky motion. "What you need is some hot black coffee. I don't see how you're going to get home if you stay like that."

"Don't want any coffee," Chad said. "Want another drink."

"Coffee is what you're going to get," Annette insisted. She took his arm, heedless of his protests, and led him

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toward the kitchen.

Trevor glanced covertly about him. None of the other guests seemed to have overheard Chad's question or witnessed the ensuing scene.

Dave Robbins maintained an awkward silence. He studied his hands intently, his attitude stiff and unnatural.

Trevor asked hesitantly, "Dave—is it true what Chad said . . . about people talking?"

Robbins avoided Trevor's eyes. "Chad was drunk."

"Dave, I want to know."

"Well . . . all right, it's true. People have started talking. You're forty, you know, yet you don't look a day over thirty."

"But for Pete's sake, what's so unusual about that? I've seen people of eighty who didn't look a day over sixty."

Robbins shrugged uncomfortably. "Yeah, but they're old. When they've reached that age, the rest is such a foregone conclusion that you just don't wonder about it. In your case, I guess it's the contrast, the fact that Annette, Chad, myself, all the others, are doing the natural, expected thing, and you aren't. That makes you different, sort of sets you apart. And . . . well, that gives people something to talk about. They discuss it, try to explain it."

Trevor bit his lip, feeling chilled. Robbins stiffened suddenly. He took a short, quick breath as though about to speak. He hesitated a moment, obviously debating with himself. Then it came out.

"Stan—I just remembered that bit of stuff from the meteorite. You know, the substance that exploded so mysteriously when you tested it in the cyclotron. I wonder if it couldn't have had something to do with . . . with your not growing old."

Trevor stared at Robbins, his eyes widening, fixing, as though a veil had been lifted from them giving him abruptly the power to see beyond and beyond to infinities of understanding. And then, slowly, focus came back into his eyes. He nodded and kept nodding, trying to assure himself that what he'd glimpsed a moment before had been reality and not illusion. "Yes . . . yes," he murmured. His voice rose. "Dave, I think you've hit it! But if the fragment actually had something to do with it, how could I know . . . be sure—?" Trevor snapped his fingers. "Hausmann! He'd be the one to tell me, if anyone could. Dave, I'm going to take this up with Hausmann. I'm going to see if there is something behind it—something queer. . . ."

CHAPTER V

AUGUST HAUSMANN entered the library with quick, short steps, shrugging his round, gnome-like form into a wrinkled jacket of oxford gray. He had obviously just laid aside his laboratory smock. His movements as he donned the jacket were jerky, impatient, suggesting that he donned also social amenities for which he had but scant time and much less inclination. Finishing with the jacket, he pawed hastily at the snow-white down which fringed his otherwise hairless pate, peering myopically through sagging shell-rimmed spectacles.

"Well, Professor Trevor! This is a surprise." Hausmann's voice was thin and reedy, tinged with the faintest trace of a foreign accent. He was a European refugee of the Furious Forties who had long since abandoned all intention of returning to his strife-torn homeland.

Trevor rose from the armchair in which Hausmann's housekeeper had

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placed him some ten minutes before and shook hands. "Hope I'm not bothering you, Doctor."

"Not at all, not at all!" Hausmann disclaimed. He waved Trevor back into the armchair, settled himself into another opposite, and began to fill the bowl of a large, curve-stemmed pipe.

"My visit is not what might be called a social one," Trevor said. "I'm calling in somewhat the same capacity as a patient upon a physician."

"Indeed?" Hausmann paused in the act of lighting his pipe. "You puzzle me, Professor Trevor. In Europe I studied medicine once, but the present finds me hardly prepared to diagnose and treat organic disorders."

"Yet I think you can help me where a physician couldn't" Trevor insisted. "You see, what I need is someone with a specialized knowledge of the physiological processes of the body—someone who could diagnose a condition which would be beyond the experience of an ordinary medical practitioner. In other words, what I want is a scientist capable of investigating something which may turn out to be entirely new in medical history."

Hausmann searched Trevor's face with slitted eyes. The old biochemist hesitated a moment, then said, "Am I to understand, Professor Trevor, that you are the possessor of this—ah—unusual condition?"

Trevor nodded gravely. "I'll explain." Speaking slowly and carefully, he told Hausmann of the discovery, eight years before, of the bit of alien substance imbedded in the meteorite, and of the strange blast of radiation which had resulted upon its bombardment in the college cyclotron. He told of his recovery from the queer fever which had followed, and of his realization, as the years passed, that he was not growing old. And finally he told of how his odd failure to age had come to the notice of his friends as something strange. He finished, "What I want to know is, does that blast of radiation have anything to do with my not growing old?"

Hausmann removed the pipe from his mouth and shrugged. "That I cannot answer without first making an investigation, Professor Trevor."

"Do you mean a physical examination?"

"In a sense, yes, but only so far as to determine what is interfering with the normal aging process of your body." Hausmann frowned thoughtfully. "I think you did right by coming to me with this matter. It is . . . revolutionary is the proper word, I believe. I am deeply interested in the problem." Hausmann rose from the armchair and gestured. "Come, let us go to my laboratory."

HAUSMANN'S famous laboratory was located in the basement of his home. It was large, bright, and severely clean—a strong contrast, Trevor thought, to Hausmann's own person, which was untidy and ill-kept. White-painted, glass-topped workbenches filled most of the available space, and these in turn were piled with a bewildering array of apparatus and glassware. There was the pungent odor of a myriad chemicals, mingled with the heavy, sickly-sweet scent of mice, guinea pigs, and rabbits kept in tiered cages at the back of the room.

A pale, lean young man looked up from the eyepiece of a microscope. Hausmann gestured at him. "That will be all for the day, Henry. You can go."

"But, doctor, I thought—" Henry began in mild protest.

"The cultures will keep until tomorrow," Hausmann broke in shortly. He

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waved at Henry again, went to a locker, and donned a clean smock. With smooth efficience, Henry put away the equipment with which he had been working, donned his hat and coat, and left.

Hausmann looked after Henry with a smile. "A conscientious worker, that one," he told Trevor. "One of the best laboratory assistants I ever had." He became abruptly purposeful. "If you will remove your coat and shirt, Professor Trevor. . . ."

Hausmann cleared a space on one of the workbenches and gathered together various pieces of apparatus from cabinets and drawers. He produced a notebook, sharpened a pencil, and finally was ready.

Hausmann first checked Trevor's heart action, pulse, blood pressure and respiration. Each step was recorded in the notebook in a fine, spidery scrawl. Then the old biochemist took samples of Trevor's blood, and also a strip of skin which he flicked deftly from Trevor's thumb with the glittering, razor-keen blade of a scalpel. Fifteen minutes later, he indicated the numerous tightly corked vials of samples which he had gathered and said:

"That will be all, I think. I'll go over this data, and will let you know the results . . . say, in a week."

Trevor nodded as he pulled on his shirt. "That will be fine."

THE end of the week found Trevor back at the Hausmann residence. Impatience burned within him like a consuming flame. Chad Barton's tactless question had been followed by serious repercussions where Annette and Dave Robbins were concerned. Chad had later offered shame-faced and almost abject apologies, but the results of his blunder upon Annette and Dave were too far-reaching for mere words to erase.

Outwardly, Annette and Dave remained much the same in their attitude toward Trevor. But knowing them as well as he did, he realized it was just an act put on for his benefit. Besides, their attempts at guile too often were offset by sudden, awkward silences, long speculative stares when they thought he wasn't watching. This contrast to the old state of relations which had existed before Chad's drunken outburst hurt Trevor with a pain that was almost physical.

Wondering and conjecture. Awkward silences, puzzled stares. *Why don't you grow old?*

Trevor had thought about it all too often during the week following his first visit to Hausmann. What was wrong? What was there about that eight-year old blast that made him different from other men? He didn't want to be different, an outcast—an alien. It was with this fear in mind that he presented himself again at Hausmann's house. He hoped desperately that the old biochemist would tell him there was nothing basically the matter, that his persisting youth was due merely to health and vitality above the average.

The housekeeper took Trevor directly to the laboratory. Hausmann was seated at a littered desk at the upper end of the room. He looked up slowly, almost wearily, as Trevor entered. The assistant, Henry, was not in evidence.

Something was wrong, Trevor realized. The laboratory seemed queerly to have changed. It was nothing which the eye could see, for outwardly the room was still as bright and clean as he remembered it. The difference was solely one of atmosphere, as though the room were a person whose mood had changed from light-heartedness to one of depression. Trevor felt a chill of fore-

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boding.

Hausmann's attitude did not help to dispell the impression. The old biochemist was slumped in his chair, his eyes fixed upon Trevor broodingly. And when Trevor finally stood before him, he nodded without smiling or speaking. The only acknowledgement he made of Trevor's presence was to gesture tiredly toward a nearby chair.

Trevor sat down slowly, his gaze fixed tensely upon Hausmann's face. "Doctor . . . is there anything wrong?"

Hausmann seemed only now to rouse from his apathy. He shrugged. "That, Professor Trevor, depends on how you will look at it."

". . . I don't understand."

"I have learned, I think, the reason for your failure to grow old."

"But why should that be so—disturbing?"

"Because it is disturbing. It is also amazing, incredible, and—were I to disregard the facts—downright impossible. But I cannot possibly be in error. I have checked my tests again and again. The data leaves me unavoidably with one conclusion."

Trevor leaned tautly forward in his chair, apprehension and curiosity struggling within him. "And that is?"

"That you are immortal."

Trevor gasped, half rose to his feet, then slowly seated himself again. His thoughts swam like bits of flotsam in the raging floodwaters of shock.

THERE was a heavy silence. Trevor searched Hausmann's face. It was an old man's face, sagging tiredly in wrinkles, gray with the hoar of years. It showed no trace of mockery, no hint of mischief.

Trevor accepted finally the knowledge that Hausmann was sincere. He was not playing a clumsy joke.

"But . . . but are you sure?" Trevor whispered. "There can be no mistake?"

Hausmann shook his head firmly. "I have told you, Professor Trevor, that I cannot possibly be in error. My tests upon the radiogens of the cells in the skin samples which I took from you have convinced me of this beyond any slightest doubt. I shall explain." Animation came to Hausmann. He leaned forward at the desk, tapping the surface with a forefinger as though keeping time to his words.

"To begin with, it is the radiogens present in every cell of the human body that are responsible for the familiar transition known as 'growing old.' Radiogens are to cells what the mainspring is to a watch. When the mainspring runs down, the watch stops. Similarly, when the radiogens run down, cell function stops. There follows natural death from old age.

"But in all too many cases, death in old age results from some disease or organic disorder brought on by the deterioration of cellular function due to the waning power of the radiogens. As the vitality of the radiogens decline, the cells lose their ability to assimilate and store away nourishment, and eject waste poisons. The familiar emaciation of extreme age sets in. Flesh sags, becomes gray and wrinkled. Hair turns white, fingernails become horny. The function of the bodily organs becomes impaired. Or, as the waste poisons in the cells accumulate, the efficiency of the bodily protective mechanisms is reduced, and the body is rendered increasingly susceptible to disease." Hausmann paused a moment, studying Trevor's face as though to determine its degree of comprehension. He went on:

"Now, the radiogens are like tiny batteries. They are chemico-electrical in nature. In your case, what seems to have happened is that the radiogens of

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your body cells have somehow become changed by the strange blast of radiation from that bit of alien substance which you tested in the cyclotron. They are now what we can call *atomic* rather than chemicoelectrical in nature. This is really not the most precise word, for I feel certain that some external energy source is involved—most likely the all-pervading cosmic rays. At any rate, as long as your radiogens are kept renewed by their external energy source, they will never run down, and you, therefore, will never grow old." Hausmann paused again, smiling with a trace of wryness.

"In effect, Professor Trevor, you have become something other than human. For to be completely human is to be mortal—and you are no longer mortal, barring accidental death, that is."

Trevor shook his head dazedly. "It . . . it's almost too much to grasp at once." A sudden thought struck him. "But Betty—my daughter—won't this affect her also?"

HAUSMANN pursed his lips reflectively, then shook his head. "No—I'm sure of it. The nature of the blast does not seem to have been one which could likely have caused a mutation of genes and chromosomes, the carriers of hereditary characteristics in the reproductive germ cells. If that had happened, your daughter would have shown visible evidences of abnormality long ago. On the other hand, if your immortality were hereditary, it would automatically have rendered you sterile. To sire an immortal child is impossible. The procreative process depends on growth and development—which is to say, aging. And since aging does not take place beyond the stage at which immortality takes effect, there can naturally be no growth and development of the embryo. No . . . the very fact that your daughter is a healthy, growing girl is proof enough that she is entirely normal."

Trevor smiled his relief. "That's one worry off my mind. Just one more thing, Doctor. It would mean a great deal to me if you would keep your knowledge of my condition in the strictest confidence."

"I understand perfectly. Do not worry. It is something I will take with me to the grave." Hausmann moistened his lips, glancing at Trevor hesitantly. At last: "Professor Trevor, there is something I would like to know. That bit of alien substance from the meteorite . . . is there any left?"

"None, I'm afraid," Trevor answered gently, sensing the wistfulness and yearning behind the old biochemist's question. "Professor Robbins and I used up all of it in our tests. It is likely that other meteorites containing the substance have fallen to earth, but the earth is so large that a search would only be a waste of time."

Hausmann sighed in obvious disappointment. "I had hoped—" He shrugged with a return of his former tiredness. "I have not much longer to live, and there is still so much to do. . . . I am frankly envious of your possession, Professor Trevor. You are a very lucky man."

Trevor straightened with a sudden feeling of power, a thrill of exultation coursing through him. But a moment later he thought of Annette and Betty and Dave, thought of all the people he knew and loved, thought of them growing old and wrinkled, weaker and weaker, dropping out of his life one by one—and abruptly he began to wonder just how lucky he really was. . . .

Subdued, Trevor took leave of Hausmann. He was always to remember the old biochemist as he saw him that last time—a tired, gnome-like figure, mus-

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ing sadly upon glories which must remain forever beyond his grasp.

CHAPTER VI

TREVOR looked up from the examination papers he was grading as Dave Robbins entered the office. "'Morning, Dave."

"'Morning." Robbins sat his lean, gangling form on one corner of the paper-strewn desk. He lighted a cigarette, eyed Trevor quizzically. "You go to see Hausmann last night as arranged?"

Trevor glanced away. "Yeah."

"... Well, what did he have to say?" Though he had expected the question, Trevor did not know what sort of an answer to make. He had spent the night staring sleeplessly into the darkness, thinking about Hausmann's revelation and its possible effects upon Annette and Dave. All too clear in his mind still were the dismaying results of Chad Barton's drunken query. Trevor thus had realized that disclosure of his immortality would have consequences a thousand times more serious. He had reluctantly accepted the conclusion that his gift must remain a secret.

But now that Dave had put the question to him, he found it hard to reply with an evasion. It went against Trevor's every sense of loyalty. He and Dave had been good friends too long to withhold things from each other.

Moreover, Trevor felt that his immortality made him a kind of outcast. He hungered for understanding and sympathy. The weight of his knowledge was too vast to be borne only by himself. He would need the advice and guidance of another in dealing with the problems which the years would bring.

And as for the way Dave had acted following the Chad Barton episode, Trevor decided it was due merely to concern regarding what there was about Trevor that could be wrong. If Dave knew, he was certain to see Trevor's side and not be envious. After all, Hausman had taken Trevor's immortality more or less philosophically. Surely, Dave would do the same.

Trevor determined finally to tell Dave what he had learned from Hausmann. Dave's reaction would furnish him with a guide for the future, where the divulging of his immortality to others was concerned.

Trevor met Dave's puzzled eyes. "All right, I'll tell you what Hausmann said last night. But prepare yourself for a shock. This is going to knock you off your feet."

Dave grinned. "I'm sitting down, so don't worry about that. Go ahead—shoot."

"Dave, Hausmann told me that I am . . . immortal."

Dave Robbins blinked his eyes once, but otherwise he did not move a muscle. Finally he took a deep, slow breath. He began to nod his head while a smile that was not quite a smile lifted one corner of his wide lips.

"I half expected something like that," Robbins said musingly. He seemed to lose himself in thought a moment. Then his gaze sharpened on Trevor, and he asked, "But what else did Hausmann say? How did he explain it?"

Trevor repeated as nearly as he could remember the explanation which Hausmann had made regarding the change in the radiogens of Trevor's body cells.

Robbins began nodding again. "That way, eh?" His voice was curiously flat. "Well, Stan, you're pretty well fixed, aren't you?"

"If you want to look at it that way," Trevor answered slowly. He felt a twinge of dread at the way Dave was taking the news.

Robbins got off the desk. He looked at Trevor as he might have looked at

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any other man. "What do you intend to do now?"

"You mean about the future? The same as I've always been doing."

"Wait until the rest of us cash in, eh?" Robbins asked with sudden bitterness. "Well, I hope you enjoy yourself."

"Dave!" Trevor leaped from his chair, knocking it to the floor with a clatter. Agony gouged his face in pale lines. "Dave . . . how can you say a thing like that? How can you possibly think I could find enjoyment in the deaths of all the people I know and love? I spent a night of hell thinking about it. I'm going to spend other nights in hell thinking about it."

Robbins avoided Trevor's pain-filled, accusing eyes. He glanced at his watch. "Got a lecture to make," he muttered. Without a last look at Trevor, he hurried from the office.

Trevor stood very still, hurt beyond all thinking, feeling, and moving. Like a chill wind the realization came that he had made a mistake. He should never have told Dave about his immortality after all. And suddenly Trevor knew he must never tell anyone again. Knowledge of his immortality was like a blight that withered the affections of those to whom it was imparted. It had to remain a secret, heavy and aching inside him, forever.

Despair grew within Trevor almost like sickness. There was to be no understanding and sympathy, then. He had to face the endless road of years outcast and alone—forever.

TREVOR hung his hat and coat in the closet and went into the dining room. Annette and Betty were seated at the table, just finishing dinner.

Trevor kissed Annette's cheek. "Sorry I'm late," he said with what he hoped was a good imitation of his usual self. "Some electronic equipment broke down in one of the labs, and I had to help get it back into working order for tomorrow."

Trevor turned his attention to Betty. "Hello, Betts!" He rumpled her already tousled hair and sat down.

"I waited for you, Daddy, but I was hungry," Betty said around a mouthful of pudding.

"That's all right," Trevor assured. "I wouldn't want you to starve waiting for me."

Betty downed her mouthful of pudding in one prodigious swallow. "I'll wait next time," she promised. Abruptly her bright eyes grew brighter. "Uncle Dave was here."

Trevor glanced up at Annette who was setting a plate before him. "Dave? Was he looking for me?"

Annette seemed to stiffen. "No. He just dropped by." Her voice had a breathless catch in it.

Trevor felt a sudden tightness inside him. Annette was holding something back.

The certainty grew upon him while he ate. Annette was strangely preoccupied and silent. And later, when Betty had been put to bed and they sat together in the living room, Annette toyed abstractedly with the pages of a book, nibbling at her lower lip and staring vacantly before her. At last Trevor could bear it no longer.

"Annette, what's the matter?" he demanded.

She roused from her reverie with a startled jerk of her body. "Why . . . why, nothing."

"Please, Annette, don't give me any of that. You've been acting funny all evening. There's something wrong—I know it."

"I'm just tired, I guess." Annette stood up. "I'd better be going to bed."

Trevor caught her by the shoulders.

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"Annette—wait. We're going to have this out. Now look at me . . . What's the matter?"

Her body was tensely rigid. Her eyes crept up to meet his, slowly and fearfully. And suddenly her face writhed as though with pain, and without warning great tears filled her eyes, overflowed them. She shook with convulsive sobs.

Trevor was dismayed. He led Annette to a chair, and she sank down, crying into her cupped hands. He stroked her hair gently, and after a moment she quieted.

"I'm sorry," Trevor said. "I didn't mean to be rough."

"You weren't rough."

"But why—? Annette, was it because of what you were trying to keep from me?"

She nodded reluctantly.

Trevor had a sudden flash of insight. "Dave was here. It has something to do with Dave's visit, doesn't it?"

Annette nodded again. "Dave told me about . . . about you being—immortal."

"I . . . see . . . ." Trevor took his hands from her as though she were no longer to be touched. He straightened slowly and tiredly. Within him something had been broken and had died. He felt very cold and empty and alone.

"My immortality makes a big difference, doesn't it?" Trevor asked after a long moment of silence. "Too big a difference?"

"How could I be happy, Stan, growing old and wrinkled and shapeless, while you stayed always young and unchanged?" Annette spoke as though from beyond the grave. Something within her, too, had died.

"I'm sorry, Annette," Trevor said gently. "Please believe me, if my condition were something I could share with others, you would be among the very first to whom I would give it. But it's something over which I have no control. I neither asked for it nor can I give it away."

"I know." Annette said nothing more. She rose to her feet, walked slowly from the room. It was as though she were walking out of his life.

Trevor put on his hat and coat and went out into the night. He began to walk, grimly and remorselessly, toward the boarding house where Dave Robbins lived.

ROBBINS opened the door in response to Trevor's knock. "Oh . . . Stan." Robbins hesitated, moistening his lips. Finally he swung the door wide. "Come in?"

Trevor entered slowly, to stand in the middle of the floor, a stranger in a strange room. He stood there, very quiet and grave, watching Dave Robbins.

Robbins lighted a cigarette. His fingers trembled a little. He seemed to look everywhere but at Trevor.

There was a silence. The shrieking, suffocating sort of silence that fills harrowing dreams.

Trevor said softly, "You told Annette."

Robbins eyed the glowing tip of his cigarette fixedly. His mouth was a gash of pale sullenness.

"You knew what the consequences would be—but you told Annette just the same," Trevor went on, still softly. "You knew—but still you told her."

Robbins hurled the cigarette from him and whirled. "And why not?" he demanded in sudden trapped fury. "Annette is entitled to know. She's entitled to a decent life—not one that's a mockery and a sham. Sure, I told her." Robbins became coldly calm. "And I'll tell you why. Because I love her, that's why. I've always loved her, but be-

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cause of you she never noticed me. You're no longer Annette's kind or my kind. Why shouldn't I have a chance for happiness with the only woman for whom I've ever cared?"

"There's no reason why you shouldn't —except possibly where I'm concerned," Trevor answered. "It's hardly fair that you should destroy my happiness to insure your own."

Robbins shrugged jerkily. "You have a hundred lifetimes to live. I have only one. You'll have other chances that I'll never have."

"That's right, I suppose." Trevor sighed and went to the door. He paused a moment. "I really don't know why I came. To knock your face in, I guess. But I can see your side of it. And . . . well, I hope things work out as you planned." Then Trevor went out the door, and down the stairs, and into the night.

He walked with no particular destination in mind, forced on by the impetus of his thoughts. He realized bitterly that life in Oakton had become impossible. He could no longer find happiness there with Annette and Dave turned against him. And there was always the danger that they would tell others of his immortality, set in motion forces which, judging from their own reactions, might very well destroy him.

TREVOR decided that he would have to leave Oakton. But how, he wondered, could he do so in such a way as would at once leave a clear path for Annette and Dave and insure his safety in the future? Seeking some method which would accomplish both ends simultaneously, Trevor came to a bridge spanning a broad river. Suddenly he had the answer he sought.

In places, he knew, the river was very deep. And there were strong currents beneath the surface that sucked and pulled. The river was thus an excellent means of suicide—all the more so since he could remember several cases in which the bodies of the victims had never been recovered.

A goal now set brightly before him, Trevor hurried home. He let himself in very quietly with his key. At the desk in his study he scrawled a short note. Terse and a little cold so there would be no regrets or twinges of conscience.

"Dear Annette:

I am following the only solution to our problem. It is the best thing for all of us, so please, no weeping or wailing.

Dave loves you. It is this that prompted him to tell you about me. Where the welfare of Betty and yourself is concerned, I know Dave will be very happy to take up where I left off, so there need be no worries about that. I hope you will find with Dave the happiness that you could no longer have with myself.

As always,

Stan."

That end of it done, Trevor went to his room. From a far corner of the closet, he took an old hat and a wrinkled, threadbare coat, both of which would never be missed. He intended to wear these after he had left his other hat and coat on the bridge to give the impression that he had jumped off. There was a little money he had been keeping for personal expenses. This also would not be missed, and he would have need of it.

Almost done. Just one thing more. Trevor tiptoed to Betty's room for a farewell of which she would remain forever in ignorance. He looked down at her where she lay in bed, small and cuddled and almost indistinct in the

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darkness. He reached out a gentle hand to touch her tousled curls, and as though subconsciously aware of his presence and his purpose, she made a soft, shapeless sound that he wanted very much to think was "Daddy."

"Good-bye, Betts," Trevor whispered. There was suddenly sand in his throat and sand in his eyes, and he left, hastily, because he could not trust himself to keep in check feelings which were very real. He left the note on the kitchen table where Annette would be sure to find it in the morning. Then he left the house as quietly as he had entered it.

At the bridge, he left his hat and coat, donning the older ones he had brought along. He knew a patrolman passed this way on his rounds. The patrolman would find the hat and coat, jump to the natural conclusion, and turn in an alarm. In the morning they would drag the river, and when they failed to find his body, they would not be surprised, for that had happened before.

Trevor looked at the lights of Oakton for the last time. They blurred and ran together, and it became hard to see them clearly. And then, finally, pulling the old hat down over his eyes and hunching his shoulders inside the threadbare coat, he began walking swiftly toward the railroad tracks, where he hoped a freight train would take him into the world beyond.

CHAPTER VII

TREVOR frowned at the experimental television set upon which he was working. He found himself wondering if the problem of three-dimensional television was going to be solved by himself after all. There were times when it seemed so hopeless.

The sound of approaching footsteps broke the silence of the laboratory. Trevor turned to see a heavy-set, stocky man walking toward him. He grinned.

"What's the matter, Pete, did Joan break your date?"

Pete Willis shook his tight-fitting cap of blond curls. "Nothing that bad, John. Reason why I'm back is because Joan brought a friend along. A girl new to the city. Name's Marta Holman, and I'm telling you she's an image. Joan's sort of looking after Marta, and wants to see that she has a good time. That's why Joan brought Marta along. And . . . well, Joan wants me to find a friend for Marta."

"Too bad," Trevor said, glancing around the laboratory. "All the other fellows have left."

Pete Willis chuckled. "Now don't try to blank out on me. It's almost eight. I knew very well that all the other fellows would be gone. You're the one I came for."

Trevor shook his head gravely. "I'm sorry, Pete, but you'll have to count me out. I just don't care for dates."

"But it isn't natural," Pete Willis protested. "You're young and good-looking. You ought to be enjoying life instead of keeping to yourself like this—working late every night. Why, I don't think you've had any fun since you started working here six months ago!"

Trevor smiled slightly and said nothing. He gazed through the windows at the light-flecked buildings of New York, and he thought Pete would have been very much surprised to know that his name was not John Stanton but Stanley Trevor, and that he was not in his late twenties, as he appeared, but was actually a man of seventy-two.

There were many other things Trevor could have told Pete Willis that he would never tell him—that he would never tell anyone. He'd learned only too well the lesson which had been

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taught him by Annette and Dave. Thirty-two years ago, he recalled, but it was still very clear in his mind. All too clear.

Thirty-two years. . . . Trevor was startled. He reflected that it was only when looking back that one realized how time has flown. Living those thirty-two years individually had been a different matter. Each year had been a century of restlessness and loneliness, of seeking for peace and comfort that he had never found.

He had sought relief in travel. Working at a wide variety of odd jobs, he had seen the United States from coast to coast. And by the same means, he had visited Europe, had walked the streets of London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome. Some locations occasionally had appealed to him, and he'd settled there for a while. But always the old restlessness had caught up with him, and he'd moved on.

A great number of people had come and gone into his life. He could remember the names and faces of only a mere handful of them. There were men who would have made firm, true friends. There were girls, many of them quite lovely and sweet, who could have brightened his living. But Trevor had avoided relationships which would have led to long attachments, for he knew the years would betray him in the end.

THE year 1987 found him working as a research engineer with the Eastern branch of Trans-continental Television, Inc. He'd kept abreast of the advances in scientific and technical knowledge, and with his training in physics as a foundation, he'd had little difficulty in securing the job. What undoubtedly had helped was that he had been hired more for his theoretical rather than his technical learning. But Trevor had not lost his knack for mastering things of a scientific nature, and he had quickly made up for such shortcomings as he possessed. It was not without a feeling of pride that he found himself drawing the attention of his superiors.

The work was interesting, and he'd found a small measure of happiness by losing himself in it. He had made few friends either among his co-workers or outside of his job, adhering to his policy of shunning extensive contacts with others. He had thus far managed successfully to sidestep invitations to various social activities. This practice was difficult if not impossible in Pete Willis' case, since the mutual liking which they'd felt for each other from the very first had been intensified by the fact that they worked shoulder to shoulder the greater part of each day. Pete Willis consistently refused to take no for an answer, instead urging Trevor's presence on dates with growing frequency. In this particular instance, Trevor realized the matter had reached a climax where refusal might very well impose a serious strain on their friendship.

Did he really want that to happen? Trevor considered the question objectively. An estrangement with Pete Willis would leave him free to follow the solitary course he had set for himself. It would prevent a long relationship with the inevitable suffering to both which Trevor's immortality was sure to bring about in the end.

Trevor's thoughts became subjective. His seclusion was all very well, but he had to admit that he was lonely—so lonely it was like a pain that deepened with the years. Getting himself to admit that was like bursting from a prison into the freedom of grass and wind and sunlight. He admitted further that he wanted the friendship of Pete Willis, that he wanted the company of a pretty girl. He wanted all the things that made life full and gave it meaning.

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He was free to do as he chose in a legal sense. A clipping bureau had kept him informed of affairs in Oakton. Annette and Dave had married a short time after his pretended suicide. Five years ago, at the age of 74, Dave had died, and Annette had followed just two years later. Betty was well and happily married, the mother of two fine children. Thus Oakton and everything it had meant to him could now be regarded as a closed chapter.

And as for sparing pain, both to himself and to others, Trevor realized that was impossible. Hurt was bound to come sooner or later. Refusing Pete Willis' invitation now would cause unhappiness just as would his, Trevor's, immortality in the future. And—the future was vague and shadowy behind the bright light of the present.

Pete Willis touched Trevor's shoulder. "Come on, John, snap out of it. I really want you to come along. You'll have a huge time. At least do it for Marta's sake. The kid'll feel pretty badly if she thought you weren't interested even in meeting her."

"For Marta's sake, then," Trevor acquiesced with a grin that belied the indifference of his tone. He rose and began to pull off his smock.

Willis grinned back. "Great! The girls are waiting in my car, outside. Let's go!"

IT WAS night, but mercury-vapor standards illuminated the third traffic level as brightly as though it were day. Willis guided Trevor to a long, low-slung convertible parked at the curb. Trevor could see two girls seated within the car, one in the front seat and one in the rear.

Trevor had met Joan Ainslee before, so all that was necessary in her case was a handshake and a smiled "Hello." Joan was a slender brunette with dimpled cheeks and large liquid brown eyes.

Trevor turned his attention next to the girl seated quietly in the rear seat, and as he gazed into her level gray eyes, an awkwardness came over him which he had never felt since a boy on his first date. Marta Holman was indeed an image, though that slang term just coming into popular usage hardly did her justice. She had very fair classic-chiseled features framed in thick glossy hair that was the rich deep red of mahogany. But it was her eyes which Trevor found most compelling—those clear gray eyes that met his so directly.

Pete Willis, to give him credit, did not attempt to play cupid. Perhaps he realized that such an effort might very well cause effects exactly opposite to those he wished to produce. Or perhaps some rare instinct made him aware of the truth—that he was dealing with two personalities, each so strong and mature that any descent from their plane would make him seem at once stupid and a fool. So he performed the introductions impersonally and casually, content to regard himself a mere catalyst in a union of two greater forces.

Trevor shook Marta's small cool hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"How do you do?"

It was exactly that, Trevor thought. He felt himself being watched and weighed. There was at once a warmth and a coolness in her gray eyes, both equal in quantity, both ready to be instantly released, but both held in abeyance until a verdict either for or against him had been reached. Her attitude clearly said that she had been led into this arrangement just as he had been led into it, that their presence put neither one under any sort of obligation to the other.

Trevor accepted the *status quo* with mingled feelings of excitement and relief. The fact that a date had had to

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be arranged for Marta had made him expect a fluttery, gushy sort of girl or one excessively shy and timid. But Marta was completely neutral. He would be forced neither on the offensive nor the defensive. He found the thought stimulating that it was his character and conduct alone which would tip the scales of Marta's opinion for good or for bad.

"Well, what'll we do?" Pete Willis asked, as he and Trevor settled into their respective seats beside the two girls. "How about taking in a movie?"

"Let's go to the Palace," Joan suggested eagerly. "Larry Thorndon is playing in 'Eclipse,' the movie they made from the best-seller."

"Larry Thorndon!" Willis made a grimace of disgust, but glanced inquiringly from Marta to Trevor.

Trevor turned his gaze to Marta, indicating that hers was to be the deciding vote. She smiled slightly and nodded.

"Larry Thorndon to the contrary, 'Eclipse' is supposed to be a wonderful show."

"So be it, then," Willis said with an exaggerated air of martyrdom. "Hang on to your hats, folks!" With an abrupt surge of acceleration that flung them back into their seats, he spun the convertible down the span of the third traffic level, toward the metropolitan section of the city.

FOR a while Pete Willis made small talk that included the four of them. Trevor was grateful, since it gave him a chance to regain his composure after the surprise which his meeting with Marta had given him. Then Willis and Joan entered into a two-sided discussion, and Trevor realized, as far as Marta was concerned, that he was now on his own. He felt a diffidence, an awkwardness, which astonished him.

He grew acutely aware that Marta's face was turned in his direction as though they played a game and his was the next move. She gave the impression that it was not a very important game, for her attitude was one of expectancy without eagerness. He could either keep on or drop out as he saw fit.

Trevor thought desperately of something to say, however inane. He voiced the first thought which occurred to him.

"Pete told me that you were new to the city."

"Yes." Her voice betrayed no hint as to what she thought of the implied question. Something merely had been said and she was merely making a response.

Trevor, having taken the plunge, now felt himself forced to swim or sink. "Then this is the first time you've ever been to New York?"

"Yes. I lived all my life in a small town in Ohio. Emorydale."

"I came from a small town myself," Trevor said. "I've been in New York only six months." He was careful to carry in his voice no suggestion that this coincidence established a common bond between them. He intended to follow to the letter the rules which she had set.

"Six months is enough time to become acquainted with city life," Marta observed. She abruptly abandoned her impersonal tone. "How do you like it?"

"I suppose I should be enthusiastic, but actually, this isn't the first city I've been in. I just happened to root here." He was swimming now. It was suddenly easy.

Trevor began to talk of his travels, careful to reveal no hint of their duration in time. He told her of some of the places he had seen, and of some of the adventures that had happened to him. And then, with seemingly no perceptible transition, she was talking about herself.

Marta had been raised by a widowed

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mother, a stern, uncompromising woman, embittered by the poverty in which the death of her husband had left her, but too proud to accept either charity or the help of well-meaning relatives. In many ways, Marta's life had been a pitiful sham, a pretense of comfortable financial circumstances that had no existence in fact. She had worn good clothes and had gone to good schools, but only she knew of the terrible drudgery on her mother's part which made these things possible. Marta's protests and remonstrances had been met by her mother with an unyielding wall of stubbornness. As Marta explained to Trevor, her mother's bitter struggles had been directed more to keeping up a front than to providing Marta and herself with the full benefits of life.

THAT she might help to make things easier, Marta had embraced her studies with the grim, single-minded determination to master them as quickly as possible. And she had succeeded —though at the expense of dates, parties, and dances, and many others of the things dear to a girl. Her exemplary scholarship eventually won her a job with an excellent salary; but this came too late for her mother to share in it, for weakened by overwork, the older woman succumbed to illness and died. Marta had come to New York as one fleeing a scene of unhappy memories.

Trevor was quiet for some seconds after Marta finished. She had spoken quietly and matter-of-factly, without any bid for sympathy, yet he felt a stir of sadness. There seemed to be so little real happiness in life. He thought of his own existence with foreboding. If mortal lives, short as they were, were filled so much with suffering, how much more suffering yet might he have to endure? Trevor found the thought chilling.

He became aware of his silence. Marta, he sensed, was waiting for him to take up where she had left off. He knew her well enough by now to realize that any expression of pity or sentiment was neither welcomed nor expected. Any response he made would have to be as matter-of-fact as the words which had called it.

He said softly, "The city is a place to which many come to find happiness. Sometimes they find it, sometimes they fail."

"Have you found it yet?"

"Not quite yet."

"But have you looked?"

"Not very hard—no, not at all. But I think I will start looking . . . now."

Marta's gray eyes were quizzical, faintly puzzled. Trevor found himself suddenly unable to meet them. He glanced away, appalled. What was he saying? It was madness. Remember Annette, he told himself. Remember Anette. . . .

Yet in spite of his self-admonitions, he could not escape the fact that Marta Holman's depth of personality, in no less measure than her beauty, attracted him the way a bright light attracts a moth.

CHAPTER VIII

TREVOR thought ruefully of his last remark. It seemed incredible that he could have uttered something so puerile and sophomoric. The words had leaped from him as though of their own volition. He told himself that he would have to exercise greater self-control. He had lived too long to let matters of the heart carry him away. He would have to adhere more closely to cold reason—the sort of cold reason which told him that falling in love with Marta would lead surely and inevitably to unhappiness.

Trevor glanced at Marta to note her

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reaction to what he had said. She was gazing straight before her, eyes fixed upon the unreeling span of the traffic way. He found himself contemplating the cool, cameo-like perfection of her profile, and with a jolt he realized that his more or less calculating intentions had become pure aesthetic admiration.

As though sensing his eyes upon her, Marta's head turned. For a breathless moment, their gazes locked. Then Marta's long lashes fell like a dark-fringed veil, and she looked away.

Trevor was suddenly furious with himself. Marta, he knew, had seen the admiration in his eyes. Coming so close as this did on the heels of his callow remark, he realized he must seem like a fool. A moment later he gave a mental shrug. What did he care what Marta thought of him? He reminded himself that she was just a companion of an evening—nothing more. Anything beyond that would lead to disaster.

Trevor was silent the remainder of the drive. Once or twice he felt Marta's eyes upon him, as though his quietness bewildered her. But he was grim in his resolve that matters should progress no further than they already had.

He gazed broodingly at the sights which flashed past as the car sped on its way. The New York of 1987 seemed more like a fairyland than an ordinary, man-made city. Great buildings reared their towers interminably into the night sky, the stars of which were lost in the blaze of colored lights. Traffic and pedestrian spans threaded among and through the colossal masses, their rows of lights making them look at a distance like phosphorescent spider webs. Illuminated signs were everywhere, winking and glowing in a rainbow jumble, as though the city were encrusted with multitudes of vari-colored jewels. And through and over all pulsed the beat of the city itself, a vast, sullen, never-ending thunder.

Trevor tried to pierce through the brilliant glare about him to the stars in the sky above. The stars, like himself, were all that remained the same in a world of overwhelming changes. With the stars he could find identity and comfort. But Trevor's efforts to reach them were futile. Feeling empty and alone, he resigned himself once more to the kaleidoscopic confusion through which he moved.

THEY had reached the metropolitan section of the city. Pete Willis guided the convertible dexterously through a thickening stream of vehicles. Presently, he pulled up under a vast, brilliantly-lighted theatre marquee, and Trevor, rousing from his reverie, realized they had reached their destination.

"Here we are, folks!" Willis announced unnecessarily. He climbed from the car, hauling a laughingly indignant Joan after him.

Trevor followed, suppressing a momentary surge of envy at the high spirits of the two. Not forgetting the manners required on such occasions, he assisted Marta to the sidewalk, noting as he did so that her gray eyes avoided him. She did not remain with Trevor, but went to where Joan was standing. She listened gravely to the other girl's light-hearted chatter.

A parking attendant handed Willis a numbered metal tag and then drove off with the car. They strode toward the entrance of the theatre, the two girls in the lead.

"Well, John, what do you think of her?" Willis asked as he and Trevor stopped at the cashier's booth to buy tickets.

"Marta? Oh, she's all right."

"All right!" Willis echoed in surprise. "Why, man, she's just about perfect, and all you have to say about her is

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that she's all right." He eyed Trevor with sudden shrewdness. "What's the matter, couldn't you get in phase?"

"Something like that."

Willis slapped Trevor's back with a knowing grin. "Just keep trying and the ice will thaw. A guy with your looks shouldn't give up too soon."

"I won't inquire as to whether that's a knock or a boost," Trevor said. "I'll just take it at face value." He followed Willis into the lobby of the theatre, trying desperately to match the other's mood, but failing miserably. He was sharply aware that the restraint between Marta and himself was entirely his own fault. She had tried to be friendly, but he had spoiled things by acting like a fool.

He made an effort to convince himself that it was all for the best. He realized he had been falling in love with Marta, and this present strain in relations was a safeguard against becoming involved any further. They both would be spared the hurt which in the future would surely have come had things been carried too far. It was rationalizing of a very sane and practical order—but somehow Trevor found small comfort in it.

AN USHER guided Trevor and the others to their seats within the theatre. Trevor found himself placed between Marta and Joan. Marta, he noticed, while not actually cold, was nevertheless quiet and aloof.

The plot of "Eclipse" seemed to Trevor rather time-worn and stale, as might have been expected of a man who had lived long enough to witness fictional and real-life themes in all their various forms. The only enjoyment he derived was from the movie's glowing, life-like colors and realistic, three-dimensional screen effect. These, however, soon lost their novelty for him, yet he found himself constrained to gaze at the screen with a pretense of absorption.

He sensed Marta's nearness achingly. Willis and Joan were seated in the intimate fashion of couples in love, he with his arm about her shoulders, she with her head resting against his. They seemed oblivious to everything, and once again Trevor felt a surge of envy. It would have been nice to sit like that with Marta, he thought. A moment later he chided himself bitterly for his weakness, but still the thought persisted.

An animated cartoon followed the main feature. Humor is ageless in its appeal, and Trevor found many of the situations delightfully funny. One so much so, in fact, that he turned, chuckling, to glance involuntarily at Marta just as she turned likewise to him. Their eyes met, held.

Thoughts flashed with lightning-like rapidity through Trevor's mind. He realized the sort of reaction he made now would determine all future relations between Marta and himself. Should he freeze up, thereby putting them both back in their proper places? Or should he continue to smile, try to show Marta that he really wanted to be friendly?

Trevor did the thing he wanted most to do—he smiled, and quite unconsciously he put into it all the lonely yearning of his tortured mind. The smile had left Marta's face as soon as she became aware of the juxtaposition with Trevor in which it had placed her. Now her lovely features mirrored an indecision.

Trevor felt his heart dropping down and out of him. Was it too late? Had he alienated himself with Marta for good?

And then—incredibly, it seemed to him—she smiled. It was like the turning on of a light in a darkened room.

Trevor relaxed back into his seat

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with a feeling of overwhelming relief. With something of a shock, he realized that his heart was beating hard and that his breath was coming fast. He marveled an instant that Marta had the power to affect him so, but at the moment all that he found important was the fact that everything was now all right.

"Now for something to eat," Pete Willis said, when they had left the theatre. "I know just the place. It's out in the country. Good food, and music that's really in phase."

Willis' convertible was brought out, and they climbed in. Trevor settled into the seat beside Marta eagerly. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he asked:

"How did you like the show?"

"I thought it was very good," Marta answered. Her voice sounded friendly enough, but it seemed to him that her gray eyes were wary.

"Have you read the book from which the movie was made?" Trevor pursued.

Marta shook her red-gleaming head. "No."

"It's been my experience that reading the book first usually spoils your enjoyment of the movie. Or seeing the movie first and then reading the book."

"That's so, isn't it?" Marta said. "I've had it happen to me several times."

Trevor had gotten the conversational ball rolling. He managed deftly to keep it in motion, and then it was going of itself as though down a hill. Marta spoke animatedly, her gray eyes sparkling, all wariness gone. They became so engrossed in their discussion that they lost all sense of the passage of time. Both were astonished when presently the convertible came to a stop and Willis announced that they had reached the country inn which had been their destination.

THE inn was one of the better class places of its nature and was evidently quite popular, for in spite of its being located outside of the city, it was well filled. The interior decorations were rustic in fashion, and the lights were low and soft. An orchestra at the rear of the dance floor was playing something slow and sweet.

A waiter guided Trevor and the others to seats around a plank table mounted on cross-braced supports. They ordered, and later, when they had finished eating, Willis and Joan danced. Trevor was content merely to sit quietly at the table with Marta and talk. It was easy to talk to Marta, for she had a broad grasp of most subjects. And he found a heady pleasure in just having her listen, gray eyes intent, red lips parted, the lights gleaming richly on her hair.

"Aren't you two going to dance?" Joan asked as she and Willis returned to the table.

Trevor shook his head smilingly. "I can't dance well enough to make the effort worthwhile." He glanced at Marta. "If you'd like to dance, maybe Joan will let Pete go for a few dances."

"No, thanks," Marta said. "I'm not much on dancing myself."

Willis and Joan did not press the matter any further. They left the table again as the orchestra started another tune, and alone once more, Trevor and Marta grinned across the table at each other with a new sense of intimacy.

The remainder of the evening went all too quickly for Trevor. It was with reluctance that he rose finally to follow Willis' suggestion that they leave.

"I'll drop Marta off first," Willis told Trevor as they entered the car. "Then you, John. Joan, of course, is last," he added with a meaningful grin in her direction.

"It's late, and that would really be

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too much trouble," Trevor objected. "Why not drop Marta and myself at the nearest tubeway? I'll see that she gets home."

Willis grinned another meaningful grin. "If the lady in question has no objections."

"No objections at all," Marta said.

They were comparatively silent during the ride back to the city. It was not an uncomfortable sort of silence, but rather the warm and understanding one of people who have shared a pleasant evening.

Trevor debated with himself the problem of whether or not he should see Marta again. Reason told him, from the way he felt about her now, that it would lead only to a deepening of attachment, and finally marriage, with its subsequent unhappiness as the years brought to Marta's notice Trevor's strange failure to age. But he rebelled against reason. The fact that he wanted with all his being to see her again could not be escaped.

At the entrance to the apartment hotel in which Marta lived, Trevor felt a sudden return of his former awkwardness. He fumbled with the brim of his hat, not trusting himself to look at her.

". . . I acted like a fool this evening —at first." He glanced at her as though expecting corroboration. Marta smiled slightly, a gentle, knowing woman's smile, and said nothing.

"I'm really not that way all the time . . . That is, I'm really not such a spoiled brat."

Marta still said nothing. Her smile if possible only grew more gentle.

TREVOR grew acutely self-conscious under her eyes. He found himself groping blindly for the words which would say the things he wanted to say. "I . . . I'm sorry if you formed any wrong impressions about me."

At last Marta spoke. "I haven't," she said quietly. "I think I understand."

"Well, I'd like to know—that is . . . well, I'd like to see you again. Sometime soon?"

"Anytime."

". . . Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

He stood there, looking at her, aching with her nearness. Her eyes met his, and for an unbearable moment they faced each other, needing only a gesture or a word to make them one in the night, but frozen into motionlessness by the very intensity of their longing.

Then Marta turned and walked quickly to the door. With her hand on the knob, she paused.

"Somebody hurt you badly once, I think. But you'll get over it if you keep trying. And I want you to keep trying. Good-night." She turned, then, quickly, and was gone.

Trevor stared after her, his thoughts milling in confusion. He was dazed by the nearness to the truth with which Marta's words had struck. The acuteness of her perceptions was dismaying. How much, he wondered, had she really guessed?

Trevor replaced his hat and started walking, aimlessly, merely responding to a need for motion. After a while his sense of shock wore off. Like a mist clearing from a distant horizon, he began to view the situation with increasing clarity.

A chill of sudden apprehension struck into him as he came to realize how greatly he had committed himself. He had done what amounted practically to taking out an option on heartbreak.

But matters need not become that serious, he told himself desperately. He and Marta could be just friends. He could force himself to regard her as a charming companion, someone with

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whom to share his time, nothing more. Just friends, he promised himself.

He saw her the next day—and the next. He took her out the following week end. And thereafter hardly a day went by but that they were not together. To Trevor these days and nights were unreal, dream-like, a colored, kaleidoscopic whirl of movies, picnics, drives, and sight-seeing excursions. Only Marta had reality—Marta, gray eyes sparkling, red lips smiling, the sunlight gleaming on the deep, rich red of her hair. Only Marta had solidity in an otherwise nebulous world.

One night he stood with Marta before the door of her apartment. Parting had always been hard, and this night it was more difficult than usual.

They stood there, in the hall, gazing at each other, yearning like a charged cloud of tension around them. And then suddenly, somehow, she was in his arms and her lips were pressed hard against his. What reality the world of late had possessed for him vanished utterly. His universe was just Marta, the fragrance of her and the softness of her like an elixir rushing through his blood with a fierce, ecstatic singing.

After a while he stood looking down at her, his arms about her shoulders. And he said:

"Marta, will you marry me?"

"Yes—oh, yes, John."

CHAPTER IX

THE tubeway extension bus was slowing. In Trevor's ear the mechanical announcer clicked softly, "Rawlings Avenue! Rawlings Avenue!" He rose from his seat, and as the bus stopped, he stepped out to the sidewalk. With a gentle purr of sound, the bus started again, whispered off into the night.

Rawlings Avenue . . . A nice street in a comfortable suburb for well-to-do people of whom, Trevor thought wryly, he was one. He strode down Rawlings Avenue, along a flagstone walk bordered by trees and hedges and broad lawns. On either side loomed homes of glass and metal, lights glowing cheerfully behind their many windows.

At length he came to a hedge-lined path which led to a house no less pretty or prosperous than any of the others along Rawlings Avenue. He stopped a moment to look at it, and eagerly and a little hurtingly the thought sang through him: *Home. Home.* . . . Then he walked up the path, and to the door, and rang the bell. After a moment the door opened.

"John!"

He caught her in his arms, and held her tight and hard, for eight years had in no way tarnished the brightness of his love. And as always, the old, old fear was a cold hand upon his heart, a voice in his mind that whispered darkly of the inevitable tragedy which the years would bring when . . . when—He held Marta closer, shutting his mind to the whispering.

There was a sudden whoop from within the house, a pounding of feet, and two small forms leaped upon Trevor. Their excited voices mingled in a shrill cacophony of sound.

"Ken! Kathie!" Marta called out with maternal sharpness. "You children behave yourselves, or mother will send you straight to bed."

They quieted, though their high spirits were only slightly dampened. Ken inquired eagerly:

"Did you bring us some candy, Daddy? Huh, Daddy?"

Trevor pulled a bag from the pocket of his coat. He looked questioningly at Marta. "Have they had supper?"

She nodded, trying hard to suppress a smile.

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Trevor handed the bag to Ken with an admonishing shake of his finger. "Divide it up equally now, and no fighting, mind, or no more candy."

WITH a gleeful chuckle, Ken snatched at the bag and scurried away. Kathie bounced after him on her short, fat legs, vociferously demanding her rightful share of the loot.

Trevor looked after them affectionately. Ken was a straight-legged, deep-chested youngster of seven. He had Marta's gray eyes, and there were deep red lights in his dark, tousled hair. Kathie was almost six. Her eyes, too, were gray, but her hair was the crisp-curling, light brown of Trevor's.

"You're spoiling the children, John," Marta chided as she took Trevor's hat and coat. "You really ought to be more strict with them."

Trevor shrugged. "Life is full of hard knocks. The kids will get plenty of that without a head start at home." He took Marta's arm and strode toward the dining room. "Did you save something for me? Sorry I couldn't make supper on time. Being supervisor of the research department has its responsibilities, you know."

"I know," Marta said softly. She went into the kitchen and began to busy herself at the stove.

Later, while Trevor ate, Marta sat across the table from him and in typical woman fashion recounted her adventures at a card party that afternoon. Trevor—in typical man fashion—listened with only a part of his mind.

"And do you know what Mrs. Daggett said about you? . . . John?"

"Uh—yes . . . Mrs. Daggett."

"She said you looked so young. I could tell she was just trying to be catty, because she looked at me as though it were a pity I was so much older than you."

There was more of it, but Trevor had stopped listening. The food abruptly lost its taste for him, became so much ashes, sand, and sawdust upon which his suddenly dry mouth worked in futile efforts at mastication. It had come—just as he'd known it would come, sooner or later. A few more years, a few more remarks like that, and Marta would start wondering. Then would come the inevitable question: *"Why don't you grow old?"*

Somehow Trevor waded through the rest of the meal. He excused himself from Marta with the pretext of doing some puttering in his work-shop at the rear of the house.

Closing the door against interruption, he sank down upon a bench. He stared bleakly into space, filled with a cold hollowness. He could feel the net of tragedy drawing inexorably around him. He wondered desperately what he was going to do.

AS THE days passed, the poignancy of Trevor's fear began gradually to diminish. He got an idea for an improved Herbing cathode tube which he hoped would give greater illusion of depth to the three-dimensional television just then coming into use, and this presently occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of all else. But the old fear remained in his mind, emerging occasionally from its dark corner in rare moments of introspection.

Technical difficulties in perfecting the new cathode tube were to be expected. Trevor took many of them in his stride, but one in particular, however, proved to be seemingly unsurmountable.

"What I need is a perforated tungsten grid so thin as to be almost transparent," Trevor told Pete Willis one evening, as the two remained after working hours in the research labora-

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tory at the plant. "But the technicians tell me it's impossible to make one. None of the machines can do work that fine. And—well, without a grid the whole thing blows up like a soap bubble."

Willis nodded sympathetically, a frown of concentration upon his face as though he sought to coalesce a nebulous memory into solid form. In eight years he had taken on further weight, and his blonde curls were fading. He and Joan had married a short time after Trevor and Marta, and now had three growing children of their own.

Suddenly Willis' eyes lighted. "Got it, John!" he exclaimed. "Listen—there's a firm of engineers in the Chavis Building, in the Metro, that handles unusual jobs like this. If I remember correctly, they solved the Barton cube-screen problem of a few years back. Why not give them a chance at it? If they won't be able to do the job, then nobody can."

Trevor considered the suggestion a moment, then nodded. "I'll try them. Here's hoping!" He began to remove his smock. "Well, that's enough for tonight, I guess. Another late supper for me. It's a wonder Marta doesn't start complaining."

Willis expressed surprise. "What? Do you mean to say she hasn't started yet."

"Not yet."

Willis shook his head wonderingly. "A veritable paragon of a wife! Joan's going to give me several different brands of hell for not having been on time."

The next day Trevor made an appointment with the firm of unusual-jobs engineers, and the following Saturday afternoon found him plowing through the crowds which thronged the third pedestrian level of metropolitan New York. The Chavis Building was an immense, glittering pile that towered with apparent endlessness into the busy summer sky. It was not without a feeling of awe that Trevor passed through the ornate glass and metal portals. At the many yards square building directory, he looked up the floor and room number of Townley and Harris, Special Engineers. Then he strode to the elevators. He opened the doors and entered it.

"Ninety-second floor," he said into the receiver of the mechanical operator.

Within a few seconds Trevor walked down a vast, gleaming hall. The hall was lined with show windows in which many of the firms on that floor displayed their products. Trevor glanced idly at the contents of each as he passed by. He didn't seem to be looking closely.

Abruptly he stopped short. Pure chance or one of the many devious workings of Fate, Trevor never knew, but his eyes had happened upon a show window the merchandise of which sent a flash of inspiration rocketing through him with the unbearable thrill of an electric shock.

"Karl Van Dyssen, Theatrical Makeup," read the chaste, silver letters on the window. And beyond, on display, were wigs and false whiskers, jars and tubes of grease paints, dyes, and creams.

"M a k e u p," Trevor muttered. "Makeup . . . Just the thing!" The old fear was suddenly gone. The future was suddenly assured. He knew just what he was going to do. With a makeup kit in his possession, he could put lines in his face, gray in his hair. He could make himself appear older and older as the years demanded—stave off indefinitely that dismaying question which had once seemed so inevitable.

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A SENSE of overwhelming relief sang through Trevor. Townley and Harris forgotten, he strode into the shop of Karl Van Dyssen.

An elderly, frail man appeared through a door at the rear of the room. He had a narrow face whose gauntness was accentuated by high cheekbones, a mustache and goatee of purest white, and small, friendly eyes of faded blue. He wore a stained and discolored smock that might have come from an artist more industrious than neat. Obviously, Trevor decided, the other had just left off working with pigments and chemicals in a shop at the rear.

"Is there anything I can do?" the old man inquired.

"Are you Mr. Van Dyssen?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'd like to buy a makeup kit. Something of the sort one can fool his friends with."

Van Dyssen smiled and shock his head. "My products are not of that nature. I create makeup only for professional use, with special color effects, for television actors and the like. My materials are only of the very best, and consequently . . . expensive."

"But you can put together a kit for such a purpose as I require—even though it may be expensive?"

"I could, yes."

"And . . . as for the materials themselves, can you make them so that once applied they would be—absolutely undetectable?"

Van Dyssen nodded, his blue eyes mirroring a faint bewilderment.

Trevor leaned forward intently. His voice lowered. "Now look, what I really want is a makeup kit with which I can give others the impression that I am older than I appear. A kit composed of materials that, applied, will last as long as possible and stand up under the closest inspection."

Van Dyssen nodded again. The bewilderment in his eyes was now mingled with an uneasy suspicion.

Trevor smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry that my motives for wishing such a kit are dishonest. You see, I have to put across a business deal with a man who just wouldn't have anything to do with another whom he thought too young to handle his end. It's very important, and there's a lot of money involved."

The suspicion in Van Dyssen's eyes vanished. He smiled and said, "I understand. I shall create such a kit as you desire . . . and I assure you that it will fulfill every specification."

"Fine." Trevor pulled out his wallet and extended to Van Dyssen a sheaf of bills of large denomination. "Consider that a deposit. And—here's my card. Let me know, in a sealed, plain envelope, when the things will be ready."

Van Dyssen glanced at the bills and his eyes widened. He smiled in sudden delight. "Yes, yes, I shall do just as you wish. None shall see through your disguise. And I shall show you how to apply the pigments and dyes. I was a makeup expert at the Universal studios before I opened this shop."

Trevor shook hands with Van Dyssen and left. In the hall he recalled his original errand. For a moment he considered abandoning it. He felt too exhilarated to concentrate on technical matters. But the thing had to be done sooner or later, and it was, after all, important enough to be done while he had the chance. He shrugged and continued on in quest of the offices of Towney and Harris.

He felt better than he'd ever had for the first time in many years. He could stay with them now—Marta and Ken and Kathie—indefinitely. No longer would he have to fear that his eternal

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youth would create envy, distrust, and hostility in these three he loved, or in any of the others in his circle of friends who mattered to him. He had a sense of freedom which could hardly have been equalled by even a man pardoned suddenly from a sentence of life imprisonment.

Then he thought of Marta and Ken and Kathie, and all the others, thought of them aging, dying, and his happiness vanished abruptly as he realized there was nothing whatever he would be able to do about that. . . .

CHAPTER X

EYES narrowed anxiously, Trevor studied for the last time the connections between Bronson atomic power engine, electrical generator, and Herbing cathode tube. If anything had been wrong, the resulting explosion might very well tear the building apart. Not that the Bronson atomic power engine was dangerous; some seven years of cautious experimentation under a wide variety of different conditions had proved it safe enough—provided that the proper precautions were followed. But the engine was just now coming into commercial and industrial use, and men had still to get over the awe which thought of atomic power inspired.

Trevor turned his attention next to the notes and diagrams spread out on the work table which the Herbing cathode tube was mounted. Pete Willis, seated on a stool with his arms resting on the work table, shifted his position impatiently. But Trevor was not to be hurried. Frowning at the notes, he started to run his fingers through his apparently graying hair—then checked himself. The dye which he was using now wasn't as good as that which Karl Van Dyssen had once compounded. Van Dyssen—that gaunt old genius—was five years dead now, and the man who had taken over his shop was far from being as skilled in creating make-up as Van Dyssen had been. It just wouldn't do to get gray pigment smeared over his hands what with Pete Willis seated so close to him.

"I think everything's in phase," Trevor announced at last. "Or at least," he added with a grin at Willis, "you'd better hope it is."

Willis rose eagerly to his feet. "Then let's get started. We've been fooling with that infernal tube for twelve years now, and the suspense is terrific."

T w e l v e years. The thought sounded a little gong far back in Trevor's mind. He paused a moment in the act of reaching for the starting switch of the atomic engine.

Twelve years. . . .

Townley and Harris, the firm of special-jobs engineers, had managed after months of repeated failure and expenditure on Trevor's part of what had seemed at the time a small fortune, to turn out an ultra-thin perforated tungsten grid according to specifications. But Trevor had made an oversight in his calculations, and though the new improved Herbing tube was now a reality, its use as commercial device was still a dream, for operation of the tube required power—power in quantities which made it impractical.

Trevor had kept the tube shelved—but not forgotten—until the commercialization of the Bronson atomic power engine. The engine had made power available in huge quantities and at negligible cost, and Trevor was trying now to develop electric leads and conductors which would carry the enormous loads. He had finally gotten an experimental hookup developed, and was eager to see how his improved tube

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would act when in use.

As with every invention of major importance, the Bronson engine was like a boulder heaved into the pool of world affairs. Its introduction was followed by volcanic upheavals industrially, socially, and politically. Men were not yet ready for the Bronson engine—but they had it, and it was still to be a long time before they grew fully accustomed to its presence. Millions had lost their jobs in fields which the Bronson engine had rendered obsolete. Other millions were obtaining jobs in new fields which the Bronson engine had created. There was talk of revolution, and there was talk of a world-wide war. Teher was talk of lasting peace, and of a Golden Age to Come.

A FIERY Irishman named Barney O'Connor had saddled the Bronson engine with a flimsy hull of metal and ridden it to the Moon. Other pioneers subsequently duplicated the east—men less spectacular than the huge, flaming-haired O'Connor, though nonetheless intrepid. Now an expedition was preparing for a trip to Mars. There were rumors of still another expedition to Venus.

The political heads of the various nations were already looking forward to the new frontiers which beckoned. There were already many quarrels and disagreements, threats and demands, promises and pacts inevitably to be broken.

It was a decade of unrest and instability. Many times Trevor felt a dark chill of foreboding as he listened to 'vision newscasts. Ordinarily, it took little enough to tip the scales of world balance for better or for worse, but the Bronson atomic engine had created a wild see-saw, the results of which when it came finally to rest, none at present could guess. On the one hand was the prophesied Golden Age; on the other, the threat of world war—a war which, employing atomic weapons, might very well sweep the race of man and his works forever from the Earth.

But it was not of these matters that Trevor thought as his hand hovered over the starting switch of the atomic engine. His mind touched instead upon Marta, Ken, and Kathie and the twelve years he had spent with them—years so idyllic that occasionally it had seemed more like a wonderful dream than actual existence. Marta and the two children had as yet detected no slightest hint of Trevor's secret; he had employed every precaution in maintaining his disguise of increasing age, so that not even Pete Willis, who worked at his side the greater part of each day, guessed that there was about Trevor anything the least bit out of the ordinary.

Trevor realized, however, that his masquerade could not be carried on indefinitely. A point was due to be reached where not even the most carefully compounded and applied makeup materials would conceal his essential youthfulness. But he intended to be ready when that time came. He did not want anything to happen which would reveal his ruse of many year's standing, and thereby cause shock and pained disillusionment in those he loved.

It would be done gently and as much without anguish as possible. One day he would simply take a business trip from which he would never return. Marta and the children would be well provided for financially, and this together with the fact that they had all led full and happy lives together, would help to ease such pangs of conscience as he might feel. He dreaded the coming of that day, for the happiness which he had known was like a sponge im-

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possible of being wrung dry. Yet he knew it would be for the best, for he feared the consequences of discovery as much as he feared witnessing Marta grow hopelessly old and gray and wrinkled—and Ken and Kathie, too.

"What's the matter, John?" Willis' voice came as though from far away. "Is there anything wrong?"

Trevor shook his head, the last traces of his reverie vanishing like mist in a breeze. "Just happened to think of something, but it's all right." He completed the action which a moment ago he had begun, pressed the starting switch of the Bronson atomic power engine. Needles began to move over the dial faces of various meters in the hook-up as the generator started to hum. The meters and the generator had been built especially to handle the enormous energy which the Bronson engine was capable of releasing.

THE leads and conductors took the terrific load—and held. The Herbing tube glowed slightly as it was activated for the first time. And then like a warning sounded on elfin bugles, a silvery crystalline tinkling lifted on the air, very high and thin and sweet. It held for a breathless moment, clear and fine, while the eyes of Trevor and Willis met and locked in mutual wondering. Then, as mysteriously as it had come, the etheral tinkling vanished.

A soft exclamation of surprise escaped Trevor's lips. His attention had returned to the Herbing tube, and now he saw a faint violet radiance appear within its broad, flaring tip. A beam of violet-tinged light so pale that it was almost invisible leaped suddenly from the tip of the tube. It struck a nearby wall, a two inches-thick partition of opaque glass. An instant's breath of warmth beat against Trevor's face—and the next thing he knew he was staring at a hole in the glass partition the size of his head.

Trevor whirled, to stare again, this time in the direction of Willis' rigidly pointing finger. The Herbing tube was gone—melted into a shapeless blob of white-hot glass and metal.

"What in the world happened?" Trevor muttered at last, dazedly. "That was no way for a cathode tube to act!"

Willis' blue eyes became dark with thought. ". . . That tinkling sound we heard—John, it could have meant a rearrangement in the glass crystals of the tube. . . ."

"Or a change in the molecular structure of the tungsten grid!" Trevor exclaimed. "Tungsten's highly refractory, but we were using power—sheer, frightful power. The grid didn't melt—at first. It . . . changed. And an instant after it changed, the tube generated something—something that tore a hole in the wall." Trevor gazed at Willis searchingly. "The question is—what did the tube generate?"

Willis licked his lips as though moistening words that had dried there, shriveled beyond sound and speaking. His square face was pale.

Trevor spoke softly, musingly. "We can have another grid made—another tube. We can perform the experiment over again, this time using less power, changing this and changing that. Sooner or later, we'll get the violet beam controlled—and then, do you know what we'll have? Pete—do you know what we'll have?"

Willis nodded slowly and reluctantly. He still did not speak.

"We'll have," Trevor said, "the most terrible weapon the world has ever known!"

TREVOR let himself into the house with his key and closed the door

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quietly behind him. A lamp was burning in the living room. Beside it, in a chair, asleep with a book in her lap, was Marta. Trevor hung his hat and coat in the closet, walked softly over to her, and kissed her check.

"Oh—John!" Marta smiled ruefully and stretched. "You startled me."

Trevor grinned affectionately and rumpled Marta's already tousled wealth of dark red hair. Strands of gray were beginning to appear amidst her tumbled curls, and her figure had grown matronly with the passing of twenty years, but to Trevor she was still Marta, and his love for her burned as bright and strong as always. Marta's lovely face had grown fuller, but it was still smooth and unlined, and her gray eyes had all the limpid clearness of youth.

"What are you doing up so late?" Trevor asked. "It's almost two. You ought to be in bed."

"Just thought I'd wait up for you."

"You shouldn't have." Trevor stitled a yawn. "The kids home?"

"Not yet. They went to a dance in the city with a group of other young people. They were talking about it at breakfast the other morning, if you'll remember." Marta eyed Trevor accusingly. "John, are you getting absent-minded in your old age, or just plain forgetful? I stayed up to ask you that question."

Trevor was puzzled. "Why, what do you mean?"

"We had a dinner date with the Vaughn's this evening—and you didn't come home. That's around the third time within a few months, John, and I'm running out of plausible stock excuses."

"I'm sorry," Trevor said. "Pete and I ran into something unusual at the laboratory, and I forget completely about the date. I promise to remember next time." Inwardly, he felt no regrets at having missed the party at the Vaughn's. Dinner parties always bored him to death anyway. Just the same old things, said and done in the same old ways, that they had become just so much gibberish and meaningless ritual. With a little shock, Trevor realized that he was tiring of people outside of his immediate circle of family and friends. He wondered why that should be, and after a moment he had the answer. It was because people were beginning to seem so much like children. Not a kind comparison, Trevor thought, but he could not escape its essential truth.

Trevor was a little dismayed at the pattern of his thinking. He was only 92—a mere drop in the ocean of years which stretched before him. If he was starting now to feel this way about others, how much worse would it become in another 92 years? Would life cease utterly to have purpose and meaning?

THE sound of footsteps in the hall brought Trevor back to reality. Kathie and Ken, he saw, had returned home. He felt a warm touch of pride as they stepped into the living room. They made a very handsome pair in the formal dress which they had worn to the dance.

Ken was now a tall youth of 19, slim and straight as a sword blade. The red lights in his hair glowed more faintly with the passing of time, but his eyes seemed all the more gray under the dark arches of his brows. He had wide, mobile lips which could lift at one corner in a grin that often proved very effective weapon against scolding. Not that Ken needed much of that, for he was a level-headed youngster, and his escapades were few and

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far between.

Kathie was 17, almost as tall as Ken, a slender flame that burned with a promise of still brighter light to come. Her hair and brows had grown a shade darker than Trevor's own light brown, yet made somehow vivid by the contrast against her white skin. Her features were finely chiseled, with a hint of the patrician, and in her long, full-skirted gown she gave an appearance almost regal.

"Greetings, fledglings," Trevor said. "How was the dance?"

Ken flashed his grin. "It hit on all jets, Cap."

"Yes—because of that blonde snip, Beth Andrews!" Kathie flared. She turned indignantly to Trevor and Marta. "Do you know what Ken did? He insisted on driving Beth Andrews home—all the way out to Yorkvale. Then he kept me waiting in the car for almost an hour, while he sat there in the house with her, holding hands!"

Ken blushed redly. "It wasn't almost an hour—or at least it didn't seem that long. But as for waiting in the car, it's Kathie's fault. Dick Hodges offered to drive her home."

"I don't like him!" Kathie snapped. "He's just a vacuum-minded space-bug. All he ever talks about is rocket ships and flight trajectories."

Ken drew himself up for an equally scathing rejoinder, but Trevor intervened. "All right, all right, let's call a truce for the present. Cut your jets now, and blast along upstairs."

The two bade their good-nights and stalked up the stairs in stiff silence to their respective rooms. Trevor and Marta grinned at each other.

CHAPTER XI

TREVOR pressed the starting switch of the atomic engine, gaze riveted intently upon the flaring tip of the Herbing tube. Beside him, Pete Willis bent forward tautly, eyes narrowed, barely breathing.

The worktable upon which the Herbing tube was mounted stood some six yards away. At this point in their experiments, the tube no longer melted into a shapeless, incandescent blob of glass and metal. Instead, it exploded with a great flash of light and a burst of released gamma rays into nothingness. Two near mishaps had convinced Trevor and Willis of the need for distance between themselves and the tube when conducting their tests.

Four tubes had followed the first which Trevor had built—and all had met the same fate. An instant after generating the violet-tinged disintegrator beam, the tubes would flash into oblivion. Trevor hoped by a different adjustment of the tungsten grid in the fifth and present tube to avoid a repetition of the trouble. What he wanted to accomplish was creation of a tube which would generate a disintegrator beam without itself being destroyed.

A year had passed since the first Herbing tube had so startlingly eaten a hole in the laboratory wall. It was now 2008.

The dawn of interplanetary travel, with its promise of peace by the opening of new frontiers, had not brought stability as many optimistic persons had hoped. It had instead set teetering upon the brink of a major war a world already thrown into disorder by introduction of the Bronson atomic power engine. The black thunderheads of armed conflict roiled threateningly, and whether the next day would bring sunshine and calm or the storm of strife, only the political heads of a few certain European nations could forecast—and they were not talking.

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Mars had been reached successfully in a rocket sponsored by the Imperial Soviet Empire. On the basis of that achievement, the Emperor of the Soviet nation was claiming possession of Mars in its entirety, thereby repudiating the Interplanetary Charter which only a few months before had been drawn up by the various governments of Earth with the purpose of assuring each other of equal opportunities in the new frontiers. Under the terms of the Charter, any nation might lay claim to those portions of Mars or Venus which had been reached, explored, and mapped by expeditions representing that nation. The Soviet Emperor, however, now branded the charter as a "stupid guarantee of charity to incompetent and backward nations," declaring that the only fair policy was for each planet in the Solar System to become the property of the nation first to reach it. And it was his grim intention to back his claim with armed force against all contenders. Frantic diplomatic negotiations were now under way to determine in which direction the scales of world balance would come finally to rest.

The generator hummed. The now familiar violet nimbus grew at the tip of the Herbing tube. Abruptly, the violet-tinged disintegrator beam shot forth, struck the metal plate which Trevor had clamped in a support several yards away. There was a burst of fierce, eye-hurting light as the beam struck the plate, followed an instant later by another as the fifth tube, too, flared out of existence.

WHEN the dazzle cleared from Trevor's eyes seconds later, he saw that the metal plate had been almost totally consumed. Of the Herbing tube itself, there was no trace. He grimaced with disgust.

"Number five!" Willis growled. He threw out his arms in a sudden gesture of appeal. "But what in space can be wrong? What is there that we've overlooked?"

Trevor considered the remaining fragment of metal plate thoughtfully. "We know this much—the tube, through some inexplicable means brought about by the molecular rearrangement of the tungsten grid, emits a stream of positrons which combine with the electrons present in any material, annihilating the electrons and releasing a flood of gamma rays. If we knew why the tube—" Trevor broke off, hitting his forehead sharply with the palm of his hand. "What a fool I've been! Pete, the answer as to why the tube explodes was under our noses all the time. Look—the tube emits positrons . . . and the material of which the tube is constructed contains electrons. There, pure and simple, is the reason why the tube go *poof!*"

"I get it," Willis said. "The tubes automatically destroy themselves. But, John, that throws another wrench into the works. If the tube is to be of any practical use in the long run, we've got to find some way to prevent that self-destruction."

"A self-contained force field or some such which would prevent the beam from coming in contact with the tube might do it," Trevor mused. "I think—" He broke off as a dull explosion sounded in the distance. Within the space of a few seconds another followed—and another.

With a perplexed glance at Willis, Trevor hurried to a window and searched the outlines of the city curiously. At various points in the distance he saw vast black billows of smoke curling up into the sky. More of the strange explosions came while he stood there—nearer, this time. New

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billows of smoke towered up, like immense black worms writhing in agony. Once Trevor saw a glinting speck streak down out of the clouds, and with it, so faint that it was almost inaudible, came a high whining sound.

He knew suddenly what it all meant, and the realization washed over him in great wave of numbering cold. He whirled to Willis, the know'edge rasping from him under the file of shock. "War! Pete—this is war!"

They stared at each other in dazed, pale silence, the explosions thundering in their ears. And then a shrill whining came, so close that the sound of it vibrated painfully along the nerves. The robot atomic bomb struck a neighboring building and burst with a terrific concussion. One wall of the laboratory blew in with a pelting shower of broken masonry. A stray chunk collided glancingly with Trevor's head. The world was a support pulled suddenly from under his feet. He plummeted down, down into an abyss of infinite darkness.

TREVOR became aware of sunlight beating down on his closed lids. He opened his eyes, gazed uncomprehendingly at the pastel walls and simple furnishings of the little hospital room in which he lay. Then memory flashed upon the blank screen of his mind, and with a sudden rush of apprehension, he pulled himself to a sitting position on the bed.

But no exploding sounds reached his straining ears. The city was quiet—ominously quiet.

A dull throbbing at one side of his head drew Trevor's attention. He raised a hand to the spot and found it thickly bandaged. Obviously, he had only suffered a glancing blow. He was grateful that the injury had not been more serious.

The door opened as Trevor started to lean back upon the pillows. A nurse entered the room.

"Awake?" Her lips lifted in a tired effort at a smile. Her face was pale and drawn, and dark shadows of exhaustion ringed her eyes. She had apparently been working without rest long after her usual hours, Trevor decided. If the robot bomb attack had been extensive, all the hospitals in the city must be filled to overflowing.

The nurse took Trevor's temperature and pulse. She seemed to become decided about something. "There's a Mrs. John Stanton who has repeatedly been trying to talk to you by visiphone. We promised to call her as soon as you came around. Do you feel well enough to speak with her?"

Trevor nodded quickly. "As soon as possible, please."

The nurse brought a portable visiphone unit into the room, placing it on a small table near Trevor's bed. She connected it with an outlet in the wall, then left.

Trevor dialed the number of his home, but the call was not put through at once. With the sudden outbreak of war, the visiphone exchanges—such of them as were still in operation—had become furiously busy.

TREVOR fumed with impatience until at last the call was put through. The visiphone screen lighted, and Marta's face appeared upon it, anxious and pale. Trevor grinned at her reassuringly, for visual contact via the visiphone was possible both ways, and Trevor knew that Marta could see him also.

Marta looked at Trevor. She was about to smile with relief when suddenly an expression of bewilderment mingled with incredulous surprise flashed over her face. She stared for

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long seconds, her eyes widening.

"Marta — what's wrong?" Trevor questioned uncomprehendingly.

Her voice came slowly and haltingly. "John . . . is that—you?"

"Of course it is," Trevor responded. "See here, what's the matter anyway?"

"Your face. . . ." Marta whispered. "Your face!"

Trevor's hand flew to his cheek in a spontaneous gesture of shocked realization. The makeup with which he had disguised his eternal youth was gone! As to how it had happened, he decided it had been removed accidentally through washing by one of the nurses who had attended him after he had been brought to the hospital and his wound dressed.

But the agency responsible was not important to Trevor. All that mattered to him was that Marta was now aware of his subterfuge of the past thirteen years. An old, old fear had blossomed into hideous reality. His ruse had been discovered.

Marta's voice sounded again, charged with the tension of a vast wondering. "John . . . John . . . what are you? *What are you?*"

Trevor avoided her searching eyes. "I can't explain here and now. But please, Marta, don't worry about it. Don't even think about it. Just remember the happiness we've had together. . . . About me, I'm all right, and I'll be out of here soon. Good-bye, Marta, and don't worry." Trevor switched off the visiphone before Marta could ask further questions. He lay back upon the bed, a cold emptiness filling him.

The song, then, he thought, was ended. Marta did not know the truth, but her eyes had been opened to Trevor's differentness. Continued life with her was impossible, for from now on she would be host to a thousand dark suspicions. And to tell Marta the truth about himself would have effects just as bad, would only cause bitterness—even hate.

It had been a beautiful song, soft and sweet and piercing—but now it was over. . . .

THE nurse came back into the room. "A Mr. Peter Willis wishes to see you. Shall I have him sent in?"

Trevor wanted to see Willis, but he realized he could not do so with his disguise removed. He shook his head. "I'm all right, but I'd prefer to see Mr. Willis later. Just tell him I'm not up to receiving visitors yet. And, nurse, would it be possible for me to leave here at once?"

"Yes. Your injury wasn't at all bad. The hospital is filled to overflowing with bombing victims, and we'll be glad to have that much more room."

The usual formalities of leaving a hospital were lacking in the emergency. Trevor was given his clothes and was allowed to leave without hindrance. He wondered why he had not been asked questions about the disguise which he had been wearing. The hospital was literally jammed with the wounded and dying, and he decided, in the press of work, his makeup had been overlooked —perhaps even ignored.

From news reports, Trevor learned the robot bomb attack had been made under the instigation of the Imperial Soviet Empire. Diplomatic efforts to stave off a world war had failed. The Emperor of the Soviets was determined to have possession regardless of the cost, of the planet Mars in its entirety. Not that he considered Mars as being so valuable; the planet itself was only a pawn in a game whose goal was world dominion. For with the promise of territorial possessions on Mars, several European nations had allied themselves

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with the Soviet Emperor in a war upon the United States. Canada, and the republics of Central and South America had unhesitatingly joined the United States in the struggle which was to go down in History as the Hemispheric War.

The object of the robot bomb attack had been to destroy communications, disrupt organization, and in general to soften up the country for invasion. New York had not been the only city to be bombed; all other major American cities had suffered in greater or less degree.

Invasion forces of the aggressor nations had been landed by air in Alaska, Canada, and along the west coast of the United States, and were now rapidly pushing their way inland. The east coast had not yet been invaded, but the appearance of enemy forces was expected at any time. America and her allies were rallying their defenses, but the enemy had the advantage both of the element of surprise and of secret preparations made long before.

From a safety deposit box where he had placed them for just such an emergency as that of the present, Trevor obtained a supply of makeup materials. These he applied in a private booth in a public washroom. Then he presented himself at the laboratory, which he found in a state of great excitement.

"John!" Pete Willis exclaimed when Trevor appeared at the department in which the two worked. "I thought you were still in the hospital."

"Just got out," Trevor said. "Say, what's the general fuss all about?"

Willis explained eagerly. "A secret weapon, John. An umbrella force field that will protect the building against bombs of any shape or kind. Experts are installing the field generators around the building, and everybody's excited because it means we have a chance against the enemy."

Trevor frowned puzzledly. "I don't get it. Where did this secret weapon pop up from?"

"It was developed by Universal Atomic two years ago and kept hush-hush. The government had been producing them all along, with the idea of using them to protect defense plants against bombing in time of war."

"But the device isn't a weapon," Trevor pointed out.

"No—but it's just as good."

TREVOR shook his head. "It's just a shield to hide under, and you're only safe as long as you stay under. Stick out your head—and you'll get it blown off. No, Pete, what we need beside the force field is something with which to strike back at the enemy—something like our positron blaster." Trevor's eyes abruptly widened. "Force field. . . . Pete—I've got it!"

"Why, what—?"

"Look — If we can adapt for use within the positron blaster a force field of the kind now being installed to protect the building, maybe we can prevent the tube from destroying itself!"

Willis gripped Trevor's shoulders in swift enthusiasm. "John, you've hit on all jets! We'll contact the proper government authorities, tell them of our plan. That should give us permission to use details of the operating principle of the force field in our experiments."

Events moved with breathless rapidity. Because of the gravity of the military situation, any suggestion which might give hope of victory was welcomed like a light in a wilderness of darkness. Trevor's and Willis' plans were accepted eagerly, the usual maze of red tape through which the wheels of government grind was eliminated, and by that evening Trevor and Willis were in possession of all the necessary

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information on the force field. They settled quickly to work.

That night New York and its suburbs were subjected to a second attack by robot atomic bombs. Assured by the knowledge that the building was protected against destruction, Trevor and Willis worked without interruption, scarcely conscious of the inferno outside. In fact, Trevor had all but forgotten it by the next morning, but he was to remember that particular attack when he learned two days later that both Marta and Kathie had been killed by an atomic bomb which had struck near the house in which they lay sleeping. Ken had not been home at the time, having been among the very first to volunteer for military duty.

An invasion of the East Coast came as had been expected, but was driven off with heavy losses. As a precaution against interference with their work by a second attempt, Trevor and Willis transferred to a branch plant in Pennsylvania. Here, three months later, they finally got the Malden force field incorporated as an integral part of the positron blaster, thus rendering the device capable of safe and efficient use as a weapon.

THE rest is part of the history which Trevor helped to write. The positron blaster was manufactured on a large scale and brought to the rescue of beleaguered Allied troops which were futilely trying to stem advances inland from both coasts by Imperial Soviet forces. With it, the armies of the Emperor were swept on the one side into the Atlantic, and on the other into the Pacific; and with it, the war was carried into the Imperial Soviet Empire itself. The Emperor was forced to flee in a rocket to Mars where he died in an accident at landing.

The American government decided that the positron blaster was a weapon too horrible for general possession, and with the unanimous consent of political and military authorities, all positron blasters in existence were destroyed and plans of the device locked carefully away in secret archives.

Trevor was left to face the crushing knowledge that nothing was left for him. Marta and Kathie were dead. Ken had been killed in the battle of New Jersey. The happiest chapter in his life had ended in overwhelming tragedy.

Trevor felt the old restlessness seize him again. One day he faced Willis in the difficult task of parting.

". . . Pete, this is my last day at the plant."

"Why, what do you mean, John?"

"I'm leaving. The war . . . and what it did . . . leaves me at a loose end. And —well, I just can't stay here any longer. Too many memory associations. It hurts, you know, to remember at the end of the day that Marta won't be waiting for me as she always did, and . . . well—oh, you know what I mean, Pete."

Willis looked away. "I know . . ." He had lost two sons in battle, and sorrow had grooved his face and taken the last strands of gold from his hair.

Trevor extended his hand. "Good-bye, Pete."

"Good-bye, John." Willis' clasp was hard and warm.

CHAPTER XII

ON THE horizon the red-gold orb of the sun hung low and huge. The first shadows of approaching dusk were stretching and deepening over the pale yellow sea of wheat that spread in all directions as far as the eye could see. The field seemed to undulate under the quickening sweep of the evening breeze,

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heightening the sea-like effect. It was late summer of 2020.

Trevor glanced at his watch. Time to knock off. He laid aside the textbook he had been studying, rose to his feet, and stretched. He went to one of the opened windows of the control tower and looked out. The angular shape of the robot harvester was small in the wheat field to the west. It moved with a deliberate ponderousness through the lake of grain, clicking and humming softly.

Trevor went to the remote control panel and turned the switch which would reduce the robot harvester to inactivity for the day. Then he closed the windows and left the tower, climbing down the spiraling metal stairs to where his gyro stood on the ground outside. He climbed in, sent the gyro skimming toward the buildings of the farm five miles to the south.

It was a nice job, Trevor decided as he flew. Perhaps the best job he had held during the past twelve years. The work was almost ridiculously easy, and it left him with more than enough time to keep up with his studies. He was glad of that. Scientific knowledge had advanced with the stride of seven league boots, and he had still to be completely familiar with all the theory and practice of the various fields of research. But he was keeping up—an unusual accomplishment in these days of extreme specialization, he thought with pride.

After twelve years of wandering he had found a small measure of peace. The old restlessness, however, had not left him. He knew it was something he would never escape as long as he existed, immortal, in a mortal world. There was no place in the world for him, nor could there ever be a place. He was eternal, unchanging, while all else was transitory, constantly evolving. He was a stone, solid and unmoving, around which the waters of time flowed in their course to the ocean of the dead past.

The buildings of the farm appeared below. Trevor landed his gyro in the parking field and strode into the men's dormitory. Checking in on the time clock, he strode toward the shower rooms. A faint odor of cooking food drifted tantalizingly from the direction of the mess hall.

"Oh, Stan!" a voice called from behind. "Just a minute."

Trevor turned as a tall, bronzed man hurried toward him. It was Mel Atkins, the fields foreman.

Trevor raised a hand in the customary gesture of salutation. "Greetings, Mel. What is it?"

Atkins was excited. "Stan—you've been invited to Supervisor Dreyer's home for dinner. He called just a few minutes before you checked in."

TREVOR nodded slowly. "I see . . . Well, thanks, Mel."

Atkins gazed at Trevor puzzledly. "Say, aren't you glad? About the invitation, I mean?"

"Why, of course."

"You certainly don't look it. I for one would hit on all jets at the chance. Dinner at the Supervisor's home—and a chance to talk to Susan. Space, but that's something!"

"Certainly is." Trevor managed, to get the right note of enthusiasm into his voice. He nodded to Atkins and continued on toward the shower rooms.

He wondered who was responsible for the invitation—Susan or Dreyer himself. His relations with Susan Dreyer had deepened into something more serious than those of mere friendship, a fact which occasioned considerable envy and surprise on the part of his fellow workers. For Susan, in addition to being quite lovely, was generally re-

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garded as a haughty and aloof young lady, and she had hitherto considered herself too good to associate with persons on the worker level. It was no secret that Susan frequently flew out to Trevor's control tower on visits.

On the other hand, Trevor recalled having made numerous suggestions to Dreyer for time and money saving improvements. Such suggestions had long been on record as being welcomed by the management, and Trevor had advanced a few ideas that had occurred to him. He decided that it was over something of that nature about which Dreyer wanted to see him. A direct invitation to dinner, however, seemed to Trevor rather superfluous.

Trevor bathed and donned his best suit. Word about the invitation had spread through the dormitory, and his fellow workers bubbled over with teasing remarks. Trevor took the hazing good-naturedly, and when he was finally ready to leave, his tormentors quickly about-faced to offer him their best wishes.

A SERVANT admitted Trevor to the Dreyer residence.

"Mr. Dreyer wishes to see you in the library," Trevor was told. "If you will step this way. . . ."

Dreyer was seated behind a huge, mirror-bright metal desk in one corner of the room. He rose with a smile of greeting as Trevor entered. Dreyer ran the farm in a capacity analogous to that of a president of a large corporation. He was a shrewd executive in matters commercial as well as agricultural, a tall, slender man with iron gray hair and sun-tanned features.

Trevor shook hands. Dreyer said: "No doubt my invitation came as a surprise."

"It certainly did, sir."

"Well, I have a few more surprises in store for you. You see, Stanley, most if not all the improvements you suggested have proved quite successful—so much so, in fact, that our overhead for the past few months has shown a marked decrease. And—well, I'd like to give credit where credit is due. You're an intelligent and wide-awake young man—just the sort we need in the executive offices." Dreyer paused. "Stanley, how would you like to be manager of the machines maintenance department?"

"That's very kind of you, sir," Trevor said gravely. "But if you don't mind, I'm quite satisfied with my present position."

Dreyer's eyebrows rose. He shook his head wonderingly. "You're certainly a strange young fellow! You act twice as mature as you appear, and you know much more than do most men your age. And from what Susan has told me, you spend almost all your time studying ponderous scientific tomes. That would indicate a lot of ambition and ability. I can't understand why you should want to pass up a chance like this."

Trevor stifled the explanation which rose to his lips. He realized that Dreyer would not have understood. He had no desire for advancement, for it would only mean being saddled with responsibilities for which he had neither interest nor inclination. It was the long run point of view upon which he based his reasoning. Advancement meant nothing in the end. It had prestige only in the eyes of the people by whom it was given—and people were ephemeral, evanescent.

Besides, being an officer of the farm would bring him into close contact with others, and this was something he wanted to avoid. The feeling of alienness, of differentness, was strong in him now. He was an outsider. People felt

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it, though they were incapable of putting their instincts into words. Dreyer had sensed it, and even with his shrewd mind he had been able only to characterize Trevor as "a strange young fellow."

There was also the fact that he was losing his interest in people, becoming indifferent, apathetic. Each new generation which appeared served only to widen the gulf. Mentally he was an anachronism—still the Stanley Trevor of 1947, with most of his beliefs, behavior patterns, and moral standards intact. The foundation had been laid and could not be changed. New additions and alterations could be made only when and if they fitted the set pattern. In a reasoning human being, Trevor knew, mental adaptations to changes in the environment can be made with greatest success only when the changes are approved of and are desired. He had not approved of many of the changes which had taken place during the past 73 years, and had desired even fewer of them.

Dreyer said, "I'm afraid, Stanley, that I was a bit too abrupt. What you need is a little time to think this over. Mull it around for a few days, then let me know if you've changed your mind."

"I will, sir, and thanks," Trevor responded, though he knew already what his decision would be.

THE servant appeared to announce that dinner was ready. Dreyer took Trevor into the living room where the members of the family were gathered. Introductions were not necessary, as Trevor had met all of them during his year of servce. There was Dreyer's wife, his two sons, and Susan, who was the oldest of the three children. She was 22, a tall girl, slender, yet rounded, strong, and tanned from a life lived in the majority in the open. She had thick blonde hair the color of wheat, made all the more light by the contrast against her bronzed skin. Her eyes were vividly and almost startlingly blue. She looked very young and lovely in a simple white dinner gown that barely touched her knees in front and fell away to a long train behind.

A swell kid, Trevor thought—and a rather naive one despite all her sophisticated pretensions. He noticed with amused interest that his appearance had started her bubbling like a kettle over a flame. She tried to mask it with a cool demureness, but her dancing blue eyes shrieked their betrayal.

Greetings exchanged with all due formality, Trevor followed the others into the dining room. The two boys watched him for a while, obviously in anticipation of glaring blunders in etiquette, but were disappointed. Dreyer and his wife gradually loosened up after their first stiffness and actually became pleasant without pretending. A pride of Trevor shown in Susan's gaze that he found enormously disturbing. Trevor felt a kind of cynical surprise that he still retained so much of his old modesty.

Conversation was of the usual dinner table variety. The same old things said in ways which for all their originality of utterance could not escape the underlying triteness. Trevor talked without making much conscious effort at doing so. He was treading a beaten path. He was playing a game which he had played so often that he could now participate automatically, by instinct.

The ritual of the meal done, Trevor and the others returned to the living room. The two boys excused themselves for a jaunt into town. Dreyer suggested with friendly animation:

"How about a game of quadrants?"

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Trevor smiled and nodded, a response purely mechanical. "Fine," he said. He realized that Trevor, his wife, and Susan were having a good time, and he chastened himself for his apathy. He decided to make more of an effort to be sociable, to be really charming.

Dreyer brought out the board and pieces, an expensive set of richly inlaid plastics. They set up their pieces and the game began.

After several games, Trevor felt his listlessness returning. Nor could he find within himself any last reserves of resistance against it. Something was lacking that would always be lacking. He could no longer blind himself to the fact. He did not have the necessary elements of novelty; new experience, and enthusiasm, which would enable him to enjoy the evening. He had no mental and spiritual unity with these people. They had nothing in common save the fact of mutual existence.

To Trevor's relief, Dreyer finally rose and stretched. "Well, guess I'll be blasting off. It's growing late, and I have a lot of work to do tomorrow."

Mrs. Dreyer rose, too. She and her husband smiled meaningfully at Susan as they left the room.

FOR a moment Susan seemed reduced to shyness at having been left alone with Trevor. He wondered with a trace of dry amusement why that should be, for there was nothing unusual about that, considering her visits to his control tower. Then Susan turned to him with sudden eagerness.

"Stan—did Father tell you about the job?"

"The advancement to manager of the machines maintenance department? Yes." Trevor glanced at her quizzically. "What do you know about that, Susie? Did you put your father up to it?"

Susan veiled her blue eyes. "Not exactly. Father mentioned the improvements you suggested and how well you'd fill a manager's post. I just put in a jet for you."

"And why, Susie?"

She took a short, quick breath as though the explanation were about to leap from her. Her blue eyes looked a moment with glowing intimacy into his. Then she looked at her hands and a small shudder racked her delicate shoulders as if she had snatched herself in the nick of time from the brink of self-betrayal.

Susan remained mute for long seconds. Trevor watched her patiently, a flame of excitement flickering dimly among the ashes deep within him. At last Susan looked up.

"Why, Stan? Don't you know why? I fly to your control tower to see you. I . . . I wouldn't do that for-anyone else."

Trevor smiled gently, a little saddened. He knew it had taken Susan an immense effort of will to hurdle the barrier of her pride. He was a little sorry that she had taken the leap. He had admired her for her arrogant independence, and now the bright luster of it was forever dulled.

"Stan . . . doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Of course, Susie. More than I can ever say. I'm just surprised. I'd never expected anything like this."

"And, Stan, you'll take the job?"

"I don't know about that. I'd been studying with something else in mind."

"But you'll take the job until you finish studying? . . . For me?"

"You'd be worth any price, Susie." It was an evasion, but she took it at face value. Her eyes misted, her face softened. She swayed toward him, and

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he took her in his arms with a response purely obligatory, held her with a tightness that had nothing in it of desire.

Later he left the house to stand under the stars on the sweeping lawn outside. A bitterness seared him with a fierce sense of rebellion. Faces from the past rose before him accusingly. Annette, Dave, and Chad. . . . *Why don't you grow old?* Marta, Ken, and Kathie. . . . *What are you?*

Lies, pretenses, evasions. Life that was a mockery and a sham. Disguise and acting, and the old haunting fear that could never be escaped. He was asking for it all over again.

He looked up at the stars, and they twinkled as though in awareness of him, and suddenly he understood the symbolism which had previously remained elusively beyond his grasp. The stars, like himself, were eternal, changeless. This was the bond that linked them.

With the realization came clarity and calmness. He saw now that two possibilities were open to him. He could accept Dreyer's offer of advancement, marry Susan, and stay on the farm. Or he could pick up the thread of his travels where he had dropped it, assuage his unhappy restlessness with the anodyne of wandering.

He looked up at the stars, and strength came to him for the decision he must make. He had to leave the farm. He wanted none of the responsibilities of advancement, nor did he wish to begin another chapter of make-believe. He did not wish to repeat with Susan the torture he had known with Annette and Marta.

He had to leave. . . . Morning would see him gone.

CHAPTER XIII

THE room was decorated in excellent taste. The walls were of soft-glowing, ivory glassex with a dyed-metal trim of cedar rose. Set in two of the walls were sunken pictures containing phosphorescent, petrified floral scenes. A forest green rug with ankle-deep pile covered the floor. Near a door set in one wall a scholarly-looking young woman sat at a gleaming desk of light oak, fingers flying over the keys of an electro-typer. A garden showed beyond the opened, multi-paned window, through which a warm spring breeze drifted in coy gusts, carrying the scent of flowers and freshly cut grass.

Trevor sat in a semi-circular lounge chair of taup-colored frieze. He completed his scrutiny of the room, looked through the opened window and at the garden, breathing in appreciatively the rich outdoor fragrance. It was all swell, he thought. Really swell. He reflected that it was only after a long absence that one realized what a nice place the Earth actually was. Pretty rooms like this, grass and trees, air that you could breathe, and a climate that was neither too hot nor too cold. He did not regret his long sojourns on Mars and Venus, but it was good to be back.

Trevor glanced impatiently at the door near which the scholarly woman worked. He wondered what sort of a person was this Dr. J. Mitchell Morrill. The newstape help-wanted ad itself had given no hint, merely calling for a "neat-appearing young man with a superior background in theoretical physics to serve as laboratory assistant." Trevor had been away from Earth for so long that he had gotten completely out of touch with news of current scientific celebrities. And judging from the furnishings of the room in which he sat, Dr. J. Mitchell Morrill was obviously a celebrity.

In spite of his initial indifference, Trevor found himself anxious as to the outcome of his approaching interview.

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His return to Earth had confronted him with the necessity of finding a job, and he had embraced his old love, physical research. He had no worries where his scientific background was concerned, for he had kept himself up-to-date with advances in knowledge. But this would be a very nice place in which to work —and Dr. J. Mitchell Morrill was an unknown quantity.

Trevor waited, toying with his hat, the humming of the electrotyper in his ears, and the odors of the spring of 2052 sweet in his nostrils. The finger of his mind thumbed idly through the pages of the past.

After leaving the Dreyer farm he had resumed his tormented wanderings, working at tasks he had never performed before, visiting places he had never seen before. Thus had passed some eleven years of a glorified tramp-like existence. There had been companions, many true friends. There had been pretty girls. But he had not again found a semblance of peace.

The world had grown away from him, and he could no longer hope to catch up. Only in his one passion and hobby, theoretical research, could he manage to keep abreast. Earth had become a strange place, a glittering, throbbing maze of harsh angles, sweeping curves, and eye-wrenching color, peopled with hard, bright beings who thought, spoke, and acted like creatures from another star. Everything had changed and was still changing. He felt more than ever an outcast—alien.

To seek escape, he had shipped to Mars. But not even nine years spent as a miner and prospector among seas of red-tinted sand had brought relief. His gnawing unrest had taken him to Venus. Twelve years had passed for him upon that steaming, fever-ridden world, first as a trader, then as a planter. An aching home-sickness had finally driven him back to Earth.

The grindstone of years had sharpened the edge of his unhappiness to razor keenness. But as there is a saturation point in all things, his despair had become a fatalistic sense of dull, leaden acceptance. He merely existed now without the fulness of living, the future barren of hope or promise.

A BUZZER sounded in a small communicator on the desk at which the scholarly woman sat. A curiously soft voice spoke briefly.

"Dr. Morrill will see you now," the woman told Trevor. She held open the door for him, and he passed through to find himself in a large, bright office, furnished even more tastefully if possible than the reception room which he had just left.

Behind a great wheat-blonde desk littered with papers sat a girl. She looked up as Trevor entered, and he felt a quiver of surprise flash through him. He found himself staring into a pair of unusually penetrating violet eyes. Thinly, through the fascination of that violet gaze, trickled the knowledge that the girl was very beautiful.

Her hair was the utter black of starless space—so black it gleamed blue. It was center-parted, swept severely back on either side of her small head to reveal tiny, pink ears. High cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes gave her rather long face an exotic quality. She wore no cosmetics, nor did she need any, for her complexion was very fair, with a faint rose tint.

She wore a flare-lapeled, mannish jacket of gray flannel, and an open-necked blouse of white neo-silk. She was bare of jewelry or ornaments of any kind. The nails of her slim, long-fingered hands were not painted. She was in all probability fully aware of her beauty, but she was making no

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concessions to it.

Trevor paused uncertainly. "I crave your patience, but are you Dr. Morrill?"

"I am," the vision behind the desk replied levelly. "The 'J' is for Janice." She gestured to a visitor's chair, drawn up at the left of the desk. "Won't you sit down?"

Trevor accepted the chair dazedly. He wondered sharply just what sort of a prodigy Janice Morrill really was. Her voice came to him, soft, yet coolly impersonal.

"You called, I presume, in response to my help-wanted ad?"

"Yes."

"I really expected all replies to be made by visiphone rather than by personal call."

"I state regret, but your ad said nothing about that."

"An oversight on the part of my secretary about which she shall most certainly hear." Anger scratched the softness of her voice. A faint glitter appeared in her eyes, then vanished. She returned her attention to Trevor, once more cool and aloof.

"What institutes have you attended, and what degrees do you hold?"

"None," Trevor said quietly.

THE violet gaze sharpened. "You had no formal education?"

"No. I studied independently."

"I think you're wasting my time——and yours, too, I might add," Janice Morrill said coldly.

"And I think you're jumping to conclusions," Trevor responded.

She flashed to her feet. Though tall above the average, and slender, she was gracefully rounded, all lithe, vibrant womanhood. Right now she was a very angry woman. The glitter was back in her violet orbs, but intensified now into a frigid glare.

"Was it your purpose to be insulting? If it was, you can blast straight out of here."

Trevor said calmly, "I came in response to your ad for a laboratory assistant. I intended to state my qualifications and do nothing else. It seems your purpose not to give me a fair chance. I said I studied independently. This in no way suggests incompetence. See here—what would be the effect upon the Sanger fission law of atoms subjected to the Bronson process of bombardment in a fifth-order field?"

". . . Why, the law would cease to apply," Janice Morrill answered slowly and almost with dismay. "But . . . . but that's impossible. The Sanger law covers all states and conditions of fission."

"Yet Wodjinski's calculations, when carried to the third development, prove that a fifth-order field is logically possible."

"But there is no third development of Wodjinski's calculations," Janice Morrill protested, her dismay increasing.

"There is," Trevor insisted gravely. "Wodjinski just did not see the possibilities, and carry his calculations the next, one all-important step. He like the others accepted Sanger as incontrovertible. Look." Trevor snatched a stylus from its holder and began to scribble rapidly over the back of a letter.

Janice Morrill reseated herself in the chair, a dazed expression on her lovely face. She took her lower lip between her small white teeth and nibbled it thoughtfully.

Finally Trevor shoved the piece of paper, now covered with calculations, before the motionless girl. Her eyes widened as they darted over the maze of figures.

"You've proved it!" she gasped at last, violet eyes shining. "This will knock scientific circles into a warp."

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She eyed Trevor bewilderedly. "But why haven't you published your data? It would have made you famous over night."

Trevor shrugged. "Fame doesn't buy much in these times. What interests me most is a job."

"And you've got one—degrees to the contrary," Janice grinned. "Anyone who can make complete fools out of Sanger and Wodjinski is a real find." She put out her hand, violet eyes warm with friendliness.

The feel of her soft, cool palm against his sent a strange thrill through Trevor. The flame among the ashes, very dim now, flickered, and he knew suddenly that Janice Morrill could wake it into full, blazing life. He wondered what the relationship would bring. He was excited—and a little afraid.

CHAPTER XIV

TREVOR finished welding the last coiling filament of platinum into its glassex base. "That's that," he told Janice. "The Morrill cold light bulb is almost completed."

"The Morrill-Trevor cold light bulb," Janice corrected. "I provided the bones of the idea, but you're the one who put flesh on them." Today her raven hair was piled atop her head in massed clusters of small, tight curls. She wore a transparent plastolex laboratory smock of light blue with a white neo-silk collar. She looked neat, fresh, and very lovely.

"I won't argue," Trevor said. "We still don't know if the thing is going to work." He shut off the welder and returned it to its hook. With its hissing gone, the twittering of birds outside became once more audible. The windows of the laboratory were open and the polarizing panes partially lifted. Summer sunshine streamed through in a soft flood. Beyond the windows the garden showed, vivid in tones of green and riotous with flowers in full bloom.

The laboratory was a broad, high-ceilinged room, fully as attractive as any other in the house where Janice Morrill worked and lived. White was the predominating color, with working surfaces of light blue glass, and shining chromium trim. Its arrangement of shelves, cabinets, and work tables had all the space-saving utility and convenience of a kitchen. The eastern and western walls were all window from floor to ceiling, making the garden seem almost a part of the laboratory itself.

Trevor gazed with his head cocked to one side at the partially finished device on the work table before him. He spoke musingly. "You know, that thing reminds me of a little machine I dug out of the sand once, on Mars. It seems an interesting speculation as to whether the vanished Martians ever had a cold light bulb—one that actually worked. They were a wise race, you know."

"You were on Mars?" Janice asked in surprise.

Trevor nodded. "And Venus."

"Well! You've been around, haven't you?" The violet eyes weighed him thoughtfully. "I think that explains why you are so—unusual. When I first saw you, I thought you were . . . like me. Then I realized—" She broke off. "How old are you—Stan?" Janice asked abruptly.

He hesitated. "Thirty-two."

"You act much older than that. You seem almost like a—" Again Janice broke off.

Trevor regarded her puzzledly. It was not the first time that she had made unfinished references to that mysterious something. He wondered curiously what it could be.

Janice said abruptly, "Stan, tell me something about Mars. And about Venus, too. I've always wanted to go—

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and I would if I were a man."

He seated himself on the stool and talked of Mars and then of Venus, picturing in words the ocher sand-seas of the former, and the dank, pallid jungles of the latter. The sunlight dimmed while he talked, and shadows stretched and deepened across the room. Janice listened, fascinated, red lips parted, violet eyes wide. And then, with a startled jerk of her supple body, she stood erect, glancing at her watch.

"Why, it's late!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea the time went so fast." She laughed ruefully, her violet orbs smiling into his.

IT WAS afternoon in mid-winter. The windows of the laboratory were closed, the polarizing panes fully lifted to permit full entrance of light. Thick, white flakes were falling gently, and the shrubbery of the garden was covered with a glittering mantle of snow.

Trevor regarded the fused and blackened filament within its cylindrical bulb and sighed. "Number ten," he said. *"Poof!"*

Janice leaned wearily against a work table, her violet eyes dark and thwarted. Her glistening black hair was swept severely back from the temples and gathered at the nape of her neck into a great, thick rat. Her light blue plastolex smock was rumpled, the sleeves rolled to her dimpled elbows, and there was a smear of carbon running down one side of her nose.

"To space with it!" Janice said abruptly. "Let's have something to eat. I'm starved." She went to a communicator set in one wall and buzzed the kitchen. Then she and Trevor removed their smocks and left the room.

Later they sat facing each other across the table of a small dining nook, empty dishes pushed to one side, brown cylinders of cigarettes glowing in their fingers. Janice said:

"I'm beginning to feel better. How about you?"

"No change," Trevor responded. "That is, I'm completely neutral. I haven't started to feel disgusted yet."

"You're strange, Stan. You've got patience that's almost monumental. *Is* monumental, I mean."

"I've learned patience, I guess."

"That's something I and the others like me will have to learn."

Trevor glanced at Janice sharply. "You've said that before. Just what does it mean?"

She dropped her eyes in sudden confusion. "Why, nothing—nothing in particular." She laughed with a forced sound. "It's just a silly idea I have. You see, Stan, I've got what might be called a kind of . . . intuition. I just seem to know how things should and should not be done. And with the cold light bulb—well, I'm wrong so continuously that it's infuriating."

"That doesn't explain your references to others like you."

"Oh—I just like to imagine that there are others possessing this same kind of . . . intuition." Abruptly Janice straightened in her seat. Her face set angrily, and her violet eyes hardened. "See here, Stan, I resent having you question me like that!"

"I plead your pardon," Trevor said softly. "You see, Janice, you've made those mysterious references so often that curiosity finally got the better of my tact."

She studied the tip of her cigarette, the anger draining. After a moment she looked at Trevor, violet eyes dark and queerly soft. "Do you know what it is to be lonely?"

". . . Yes."

"I mean really lonely, Stan. The kind of loneliness the stars must feel."

"Or the loneliness of an outcast. The

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loneliness of an alien among beings of another race."

Janice nodded slowly, gravely. "That kind of loneliness." Her violet eyes met his, dark and piercing, as though reaching into him for something he had hidden away.

Trevor said, "But I don't feel so lonely—any more."

The dark, probing gaze was suddenly veiled.

THE glittering ovoid of a cold light bulb hung from its support over the work table. Trevor finished making last-minute connections and turned to Janice. "Number sixteen. Hold your breath."

Janice laughed. "I haven't any to hold. Oh, Stan, if this test should fail—"

"So it fails. So we try again, and keep trying until it succeeds."

"I just haven't got that monumental patience of yours."

"Don't worry—I have enough for both of us."

It was morning, and spring again. Sunlight flooded through the laboratory windows. The trees and shrubbery of the garden outside were dotted with buds, and a few birds were already practicing their summer songs. They didn't seem to need much practice.

Janice wore a light green plastolex smock, the collar formed by the green and tan checked dress which she wore beneath it. Her gleaming midnight hair was braided into a coronal. She looked fresh and sweet and somehow symbolic of the spring season.

Trevor glanced at Janice, his hand upon the power switch. Her eyes met his in violet intimacy, and he found himself wishing with an aching intensity that this test would succeed, if only for her sake. For all her keen, piercing intelligence, she was high-strung and temperamental, and he knew that the sharp, bright blade of her would soon snap under the continued blows of disappointment.

He could find within himself no apprehension for his way of thinking. He acknowledged his love for her with the same dull resignation that he accepted the fact of his own sorrow-scarred immortal existence. Never before had he experienced the irresistible appeal that was Janice's—quick and bright, with the fierce, consuming beauty of an atomic flame. Hers was a flashing intelligence and a glowing loveliness that pulled at him as a beacon draws a lost, lonely creature of the night. With Janice he felt on the same plane as with an equal. She was no shallow, simpering girl, but a strong, mature woman with an astonishing depth of mind—qualities enhanced rather than detracted from by her volatile, mercurial personality.

Trevor turned on the power switch. Janice leaned forward tautly, lower lip between her teeth, violet eyes intent.

The fire-fly glow leaped out around the coiling filament within the cold light bulb. Almost the heatless flame they sought flickered into being. But the next instant the filament flared blue-white, and there sounded the tinkle of breaking glass. The sixteenth bulb had gone the way of its predecessors.

JANICE sagged, breath sighing from her lips. And then, with a sudden, furious twist of her body, she snatched up a ring stand, raised it high, face white with rage, violet eyes dark with fury.

Trevor realized her intention in a flash. Janice was going to smash the apparatus to bits. He caught her shoulders, swung her around to face him.

"Janice—stop it!"

"Let me go!" she stormed. "Let me go—do you hear?"

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"Not unless you stop acting like a spoiled brat. Throwing a tantrum isn't going to help any."

"Stan . . . let—me—go." Icy wrath trembled in her voice.

"Not until you get a grip on yourself," he said quietly. "We'll need the apparatus. We're going to lick this thing, or it's going to lick us."

She writhed and twisted in his grasp, eyes blazing with violet flame. But he held her as though she were a child, keeping her locked in a vise of impotency.

Finally she ceased her struggles. She looked up at him, her face a pale, set mask, a glitter in her eyes almost of hate. "You're fired. Get out of here. I never want to see you again."

"All right." Trevor stripped off his smock, and without so much as a last glance at her, began walking from the laboratory.

A cry that had in it all the poignancy of fright sounded behind him. "Stan—oh, no! Don't leave!"

He turned, and with a rush she ran into his arms. He held her hard against him, his face in her hair. Her slim body trembled, and she made small, choking sounds.

Trevor started breathing again.

After a moment she looked up at him, her violet eyes misty. "Stan, I couldn't let you leave."

"I didn't want to leave. I love you, Janice."

"Kiss me, Stan."

There was a bright stillness. Dimly, from the garden outside, came the flutter of wings and intermittent, bickering chirps. The birds seemed to have tired of practicing.

She pushed a little away from him. She asked, "What are you going to do about it, Stan?"

"About what?"

"About loving me."

"I guess I'll have to marry you."

"You most certainly shall."

She was once more close against him. Clarity came to Trevor by slow degrees, and suddenly with a cold, stinging shock he realized what he had just done.

He had asked for it all over again.

But had he? The idea came to him with a lightning flash of inspiration. Space travel was now common. He could charter a rocket, search space for a meteorite containing a bit of the strange radioactive substance the explosion of which, after neutron bombardment in the cyclotron, had made him immortal.

And then—and then, he thought with a leaping thrill, he could make Janice immortal also! An immortal wife, side by side with him down the centuries. No more worries, no more fears. An end forever to pretense and acting.

He looked beyond Janice, beyond the laboratory and the garden, into a clear, bright future.

CHAPTER XV

EVENING shadows were deepening over the garden. A cool breeze rippled the leaves of trees and shrubs and set swaying on their stalks flowers that were resplendent in the glorious hues of summer. Over the splashing of the fountain came the sleepy twitter of birds and occasionally the flutter of wings. The day was a beautiful song reaching its finale.

Trevor and Janice reclined on lounge chairs in a tiny nook formed by lilac bushes. The chairs were very close together, and he held her hand.

"Mrs. Stanley Trevor," Janice murmured. "I have still to get accustomed to it." Her black hair was parted in the center and unbound, falling far below the level of her shoulders. She wore a short, full-skirted dress of yellow neo-

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silk. Her feet were bare, and her long, lovely legs gleamed with a pearly luster in the fading light.

Trevor grinned lazily. "I have a lot to get accustomed to, myself."

"Everything happened just like that," Janice said, snapping the fingers of her free hand. "Why, Stan, I actually don't know anything about your background or your past."

He did not meet her eyes. He had been waiting the past three months for an opportunity which would allow him to reveal to Janice as much without shock as possible his secret of immortality and his plans for making her immortal also. With a breathless quickening of his heart, he realized that the ideal time had come.

Yet he hesitated. The flame among the ashes was bright and full again, and the old song was playing once more with well-remembered sweetness. He was happy with Janice as he had never hoped again to be happy. He wanted nothing to happen which would still the song or extinguish the flame.

But he could not escape the urgent necessity of getting it over with. He did not want to put things off until the years were beginning to dull Janice's vivid youth.

He met her gaze. She was watching him in a way that struck him abruptly as—queer. Her eyes held a violet glitter between lowered lids. Her shadowed features seemed oddly mask-like and intent. But wonder was stifled by the pressure of words upon his lips.

"Janice, there's something about me—my past—that I haven't told you. I . . . I was afraid to tell you. I was afraid it would spoil the happiness I found with you. But, Janice, you have to know. It will come as a great shock to you, yet it is something in which you can share—if you want it."

She had not moved. She said nothing. In her face was still the strange lack of expression. In her low-lidded eyes glittered the same violet watching.

"Janice . . . I am—"

Her voice cut suddenly into his words, very quiet and grave. "I know, Stan."

He released her hand, pulled himself sharply erect in the chair. "*You know!* But, Janice, how can you possibly—"

"You are immortal. My perceptions told me it was something like that, but it was not clear until now. The intensity of your thoughts—" She broke off, and a gentle smile lifted the corners of her mouth, taking the oddness from her face. "You see, Stan, there is something about me also that hasn't been told. I, too, was afraid of the effect which revealing it might have. But this seems a time for confessions."

TREVOR was limp in the chair, his thoughts whirling in chaotic confusion. He gasped, "Janice, are you trying to tell me that you . . . read my mind—that you have the power. . . ."

She nodded slowly. "I know about your immortality—and I know about your plan to make me immortal also. But I am not able to read minds in the full meaning of the term. My ability is limited, like viewing objects through thick glass. Only seldom is there any degree of clarity. Most of the time it is more like suspecting than actually knowing." Janice's voice quickened.

"But, Stan, that is not all my secret. I possess this limited telepathic ability, I possess all this"—she waved a slender arm to include the house and garden—"because I am mentally . . . a mutant. I think you can call me a superwoman. Remember the bombing attack upon America in 2008, at the outbreak of the Hemispheric War? Well, the radiations from the robot atomic bombs did not kill in all cases where they reached hu-

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man beings. In many instances they caused mutations in the genes and chromosomes of the human germ plasm.

"You probably remember all this, Stan. It created a sensation through the epidemic of monster births which followed. But not all the mutations were monsters. Some—a very few—were like me." She turned suddenly to Trevor, her dusk-dimmed, lovely features imploring. "But, Stan, please don't feel that I am . . . strange. In almost all physical essentials, I am the same as any other woman who walks the earth today. It is only mentally that I am different." Janice relaxed back into the chair. She continued musingly:

"And that may not be such a great difference after all. I learn more easily and rapidly, think faster and more logically—but there are any number of normal women who can do the same. My ability to read minds seems more a psuedo talent than anything else. Only sometimes I've wondered if this ability didn't seem so limited because it wasn't carried out under the right conditions—that is, with others of my kind."

"Haven't you ever met any?" Trevor queried.

"No—not yet. But there must be others like me, Stan. The intensity of the radiations which produced me must have been repeated at least twice. Sometimes, in crowds, I catch stray snatches of thought—almost as though voices were speaking in my mind. But it always happens too rapidly for me to be sure that those minds I touched were like mine." Janice was silent a moment. "It's past now, but once I felt so lonely and alone. I had everything a woman could have wanted—except companionship and love. I despaired of ever finding these. Normal women seemed vapid and dull, normal men brutish and boresome. Then you came, Stan, and I realized at once that you were different. You're very intelligent—and strong."

"But, Janice, my immortality—"

"Creates no complications," Janice broke in to finish for him. "After all, you've hit upon the ideal solution for both of us."

"Then you'll go through with it?"

"Of course I will, Stan. It's an honor. Think of it—you and I together . . . always!"

He reached for her, groping through the darkness, found her.

After a while, they discussed plans. They would charter a rocket, search space for the unknown radioactive substance. Then they would build an early model cyclotron, repeat as closely as possible the steps of Trevor's fateful test. And finally, if everything worked out—and Trevor prayed it would—they would face life together, hand in hand, forever. . . .

ONLY in its highlights did Trevor care to look back upon the nerve-wracking year which followed.

There was the trip through space in the rocket which he had chartered, Earth a glowing green ball that receded with distance. Harsh utility of metal walls and rubber-sheathed passageways, compartments that were stuffy and confined. Janice in a varlon traveling suit of brown and gold, her midnight hair braided into a tight bun at the nape of her neck.

"Stan, aren't the stars beautiful?"

"As beautiful as you are, Janice. And as ageless as you are soon going to be."

"But, Stan, suppose we fail to find that radioactive material?"

"Don't say that, Janice." He gripped her shoulders hard. "We must find some. We must!"

There were the long, disappointment-laden months of searching on the fringe of the Asteroid Belt, with the constant, attendant danger of being struck. The

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magnetic grapple, an arm that reached out again and again, snaring the frozen, jagged chunks of iron and rock that drifted past. The indicator needle of the Lauder special prospector's electroscope, maddeningly quiescent after countless tests. Janice, weary and dejected.

"Stan, it's hopeless. Space is so big."

"We can't give up, Janice."

And then, when all hope seemed gone —success. Cutting open one meteorite in response to a quiver from the indicator of the Lauder electroscope, Trevor found at last a fragment of the unknown silvery blue radioactive substance. And not a mere bit this time, but a piece fully as large as a man's fist.

There was the experiment, conducted in a specially-built, early model cyclotron. Trevor remained in the laboratory only long enough to handle the initial, major stages of the process. He thought it best not to risk the consequences of a second dose of the strange radiation.

"All right, Janice, I have to leave now. You're sure you know what to do?"

"Yes, Stan. Wait until the light flashes, then open the reaction chamber and take out the fragment. And then . . . and then to wait for the blast."

"You're not afraid?"

"No, but I keep thinking—if it should fail. . . ."

"It can't fail, Janice. It *can't!* Not after we've gone this far."

There was the waiting beyond the laboratory, the tight, cold fear that deepened with every beat of his heart. And there was the rushing back after the scheduled time, afraid to breathe, to hope, even to think. Janice, lying pale and still upon the floor. . . .

And finally there was the fever and Janice's over-night recovery to a new world of vigor and well-being.

"Well, Janice, it's over. You're immortal now."

"I can hardly believe it. It seems too good to be true."

"But it is true, Janice. Don't worry about that. You repeated perfectly every step of the transition through which I passed."

"Then it's you and I, Stan—always?"

"Always, Janice."

CHAPTER XVI

TREVOR surveyed the ruins of the cold light bulb and sighed. "I'm beginning to lose some of that monumental patience of mine."

"That's the twentieth failure," Janice said. "We've spent over two years trying to develop this idea, Stan, and I'm becoming convinced it's just a waste of time. There just isn't any metal refractory enough to take the strain."

"No ordinary metal or alloy," Trevor corrected. "What we need is a metal atomically strengthened by one of the new vibro-hardening processes."

"But that would require a skilled metallurgist, Stan."

"Then we'll get one. I'm going to crack this filament problem or it's going to crack me."

Janice grinned. "I rather expect the latter." She was vibrant with the knowledge of her immortality. Color glowed richly in her face, and her violet eyes sparkled.

It was 2055. Beyond the windows of the laboratory, dusk was settling over the garden, vivid in autumn colors of brown, red, and gold.

Trevor glanced at the garden. He felt a touch of surprise at the realization that the end of another year was approaching. Time passed quickly now, for he was absorbed in his work, and his happiness with Janice was nothing short of ideal. He thought of his present life, in fact, as more of a wonderful

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dream than actual existence.

Occasionally he wondered, with the ingrained pessimism of earlier days, if it all were not too good to last. But he would force the thought from his mind as quickly as it came. He told himself fiercely that it had to last. With Janice he had made his last bid for happiness, and if it failed, he knew all future efforts would be futile.

Janice asked, "Stan, are you serious about hiring a metallurgist to help us?"

He nodded. "Dead serious. Our own knowledge is too general. Only an expert in metals can overcome the filament difficulty."

"You're the boss," Janice said. "I'll leave the hiring and firing to you."

Trevor placed a help-wanted ad in one of the evening newstapes, and the following morning found him interviewing the first of a stream of applicants.

The man's name was James Lille. Trevor was taller than average, but Lille topped him by several inches. Lille was, however, of rapier-like slenderness, dark, with hawkish, rather sharp features. His black eyes flashed with a quick intelligence. His clothing was conservative in contrast to the violent hues that were the style. He wore an open-necked blue blouse, and a suit of gray synthewool whose plainness did nothing to conceal the fact that it was obviously expensive.

IN A conversational tone, Trevor asked the usual routine questions. Within a matter of mere minutes he was certain that Lille was the man he wanted. Lille's training and experience were excellent. His answers were made quietly and matter-of-factly, as one who has a lot to offer and isn't asking for anything. Moreover, there was something about Lille that Trevor instantly liked, an indefinable quality that reminded him vaguely of Janice.

Trevor stood up and held out his hand. "You're hired," he told Lille.

The other grinned. "Thanks. It may seem strange, but I have a hunch I'm going to like working here."

Trevor nodded abstractedly as he buzzed the secretary in the reception room. "Please advise all further applicants that the position has been filled," he said into the communicator.

Trevor turned back to Lille. "All right, let's go to the laboratory. I'll introduce you to my wife." As Lille fell into step beside him, Trevor explained his and Janice's work with the cold light bulb and their failure to find a suitable material for a filament. Lille listened intently, black eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

Janice was standing in the angle formed by the windows of the laboratory, looking out into the garden. She turned with a queerly abrupt movement as Trevor and Lille entered the room. She stared at Lille, her violet eyes very wide. Her lovely features registered an expression of incredulous surprise and delight.

Lille gazed back at Janice with the same astonished fixity. He had dropped his hat, but he didn't seem to notice it. His entire attention was concentrated upon Janice. His thin lips lifted slowly in a smile.

Trevor watched them in perplexity. "I plead your pardon, but have you met before?"

Lille turned slowly, almost as though reluctant to take his eyes from Janice. "No, we've never met—but I feel as if I've known her all my life." He looked at Janice again. She neither moved nor spoke, drinking in his gaze.

A cold ripple of realization brought an end to Trevor's bewilderment. He understood suddenly why Lille had reminded him vaguely of Janice. Lille, like Janice, was a mutant!

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Trevor felt a thrill of apprehension. The dismaying knowledge came to him that he had made a mistake in hiring Lille.

TREVOR'S alarm increased during the weeks which followed. For a while an odd sort of restraint kept Janice and Lille from being other than normally courteous. It was due, Trevor decided, to a shyness which each felt at being thrown for the first time into contact with another of their kind. But this reserve gradually wore off, and Janice and Lille became quite friendly—a bit too friendly, perhaps.

Because of their mutual telepathic ability, Janice and Lille were able to work and hold silent converse at the same time. At first Lille spoke aloud, in acknowledgement of Trevor's presence, but later he came to disregard Trevor entirely, as though becoming absorbed in his talks with Janice to the exclusion of all else. Trevor found the situation maddening, for it was like being excluded, cast out. He could only guess at the mental exchanges which took place.

"Why, Stan, you're disturbed!" Janice exclaimed in surprise, one evening when she and Trevor were alone. It was as though she had become aware of it for the first time.

"Disturbed?" Trevor's face lighted with sudden vehemence. Then he shrugged, realizing that the sparks of his indignation would only ignite Janice's quick temper and lead to a quarrel. "I could think of words which would describe my real feelings more accurately," he said quietly.

Janice looked contrite. "Is it because of . . . Jim?"

"Off-handedly, I can't think of anyone else."

"I'm sorry, Stan," Janice said softly. "I know how you must feel." She gazed silently at her hands a moment. Finally she looked up. "Stan, please don't misunderstand. You see, Jim is the first of my kind that I've ever met. And . . . well, I find a strange pleasure in being able to talk telepathically with him. It's as if I had been born to swim, but had been in water for the first time only now." Janice stared thoughtfully into space.

"I've learned a lot from Jim," she went on. "Stan, he told me there are mutants such as he and I all over America. Not just a few, but thousands—and more are being born all the time. This means that within a few generations there will be two races here on Earth—the mutants and normal people, or the Muties and the Norms, as Jim calls them.

"The Muties are trying to keep their existence a secret. From such experiences they've had with the Norms so far, they know that their superior mental qualities will make them hated and feared. The Norms are at present the dominant race, and once they become aware that they have rivals in the Muties, they will fight jealously to keep their supremacy. They might even wage a war of extermination. And, Stan, there seems to be no hope for the Muties, since they are a minority, and will be for a long time to come."

Trevor said slowly, "You seem very much concerned with the Muties and their problems, Janice."

"And why not?" she demanded sharply. "They're my people."

My people. My people. The words echoed dirge-like in Trevor's mind. He had never anticipated the forming of a difference such as this between Janice and himself—a difference as great as black from white and hot from cold. He was filled with a sudden empty hurting. He was not of Janice's people—but Jim Lille was. . . .

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TREVOR realized that Lille constituted a disturbing factor—the serpent, so to speak, in his Garden of Eden. The idea came to him that if the problem of a sufficiently refractory filament for the cold light bulb were solved, Lille would have no longer a reason to remain at the laboratory, and would therefore be obliged to leave. He was careful to conceal the thought, however, so that Janice and Lille would detect no hint of his purpose. He threw himself into the work with renewed energy, as though having become impatient with the slowness of its progress.

Lille, with his ultra-keen Mutie faculties, had early realized the difficulty in connection with the cold light filament. He knew just what was needed, and the only remaining problems were those of a purely technical nature. Whipped into redoubled activity by Trevor's apparent impatience, the last barriers were soon hurdled, and the cold light bulb finally became a reality.

"Well, that's over with," Trevor told Janice casually. "We won't need Jim anymore. He did a fine job, and I think we ought to send him off with a bonus."

It was evening. Trevor and Janice were alone in their portion of the house. Janice wore a flowing robe of crimson neo-silk. Her hair was unbound, floating about her head like a cloud of solidified black smoke.

Janice was silent a long moment. Then she said hesitantly, "Stan, is it really necessary to let Jim go?"

"I can't think of any reason why we should keep him any longer. We're finished with the cold light bulb."

"But there are other projects with which Jim could help us."

"We're quite capable of getting along by ourselves." He took her by the shoulders in sudden earnestness. "Janice, wake up to the situation! Can't you see that Jim is a destructive influence on our lives? You're admitting your interest in him by the very fact of your desire to have him stay. There isn't enough room for both of us." His grip tightened. "Janice, you've got to make a choice. Either Jim goes—or I go."

"Jim stays." Janice's voice was quietly determined. Her violet eyes were level and cold.

Trevor's hands slipped in sudden laxness from her shoulders. He was s t u n n e d. "Janice . . . that's your choice?"

"That's my choice, Stan. Jim is my kind. I was happy enough with you, but I never knew true happiness until Jim came. You could understand only if you experienced the delightful intimacies of telepathic communication. It's as if I had lived with deaf-mutes all my life and had only now met a person with whom I could exercise my natural gifts of hearing and speech."

Trevor asked gently, "But what of your immortality, Janice? Jim's years are numbered. In the end, you will only find yourself alone."

"Don't you think I've a l r e a d y thought of that?" she countered. "I have a solution—the only solution. There is still a large piece left of the radioactive substance which we found in space, and we still have the cyclotron. And I know perfectly the steps of the immortalizing process. I intend to make Jim immortal also."

The room seemed to whirl crazily before Trevor's eyes. Dimly, as though from a great distance, he became aware that Janice was speaking again.

"The situation isn't so hopeless, Stan. You still have a chance for happiness. There are any number of pretty, intelligent Norm girls. You could find one you like and make her immortal also. Surely there's room enough in the world

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for other immortals." Janice paused a moment in hesitation.

"Jim and I have no right to ask anything of you after . . . after this. But, Stan, there's one thing we want—that we have to have. It's the positron blaster."

CLARITY returned suddenly to Trevor. He repeated slowly, "The positron blaster?" He recalled having told Janice of the device a short time after their marriage. Knowledge of its existence had been kept secret through the years. The names of Trevor and Willis as its inventors had never been made public. History merely explained the overwhelming victory of America and her allies in the Hemispheric War as having been due to a secret weapon, adding no other details.

"Why do you and Jim want the positron blaster, Janice?" Trevor asked softly.

"Not Jim and I alone. The Muties need it, Stan. Jim and I have discussed the future of the Muties from every angle—and it ends always in the same conclusion. There will be conflict between the Muties and the Norms. Since the Muties are few in number, they are fated to lose. They might very likely even face complete extermination. And it isn't fair—the Muties are just as much entitled to existence as are the Norms. Stan, if you will give Jim and me complete details of the blaster, you and yours will be guaranteed safety and comfort through all eternity."

Trevor smiled gently, though inside him he was cold, cold. He took Janice's face in his hands. He spoke softly, thinking only of what he had to say.

"Janice, the problems of the Muties will not arrive for many years, and even then they will develop so slowly that many solutions will be found, either by Muties or Norms, without the necessity of war. Space travel is reaching out to the stars. There are countless worlds upon which the Muties can live alone and in peace." Still smiling gently, Trevor shook his head. "But your motives for wanting the positron blaster are not so completely altruistic, Janice. You gave yourself away. I don't need telepathic ability to know what's in your mind. You and Jim want the blaster not to make the world safe for Muties if extermination should threaten in the future—but to take over the world for Muties now. Now. You intend to organize in secret, take the Norms by surprise, subjugate them with the aid of the blaster, then set yourselves up in control. The Muties supreme as you and Jim feel they should be—and you and Jim, immortal rulers with an irresistible weapon to discourage all contenders for the throne. Isn't that it, Janice?"

She shook her head mutely. Her lower lip was hard between her teeth, and her violet eyes were wide.

"Yes, that's it," Trevor went on. "I can see it in your face. Janice, with all your superb intelligence, how could you have thought that I would unloose a horrible thing like the positron blaster upon the world—and more, upon the Norms who, after all, are my own people? How could you have thought that I would permit you to spread the curse of immortality without regard to the consequences? No, Janice. I made a mistake when I told you about the blaster. I made a mistake when I gave you immortality. But it isn't too late to make up."

The thought, so carefully hidden, must have leaked from him. Or she must have read his intention in his eyes. With a convulsive gasp, she caught at his hands, still cupping her face, and twisted inside.

But he had felt the first warning

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quiver of her muscles. Like a flash his hands darted to her throat, caught, tightened, his thumbs pressing, pressing. She writhed desperately in his grasp, her face darkening, her nails raking deep furrows in his arms. Her crimson robe fell open to reveal the whiteness of her beneath, and her black hair swirled about her in dishevelment. Abruptly she ceased her frenzied struggles, and her violet eyes opened very wide. She made a calling, pleading face, though no sound issued—or could issue—from her lips. Then her eyes closed, and she went limp in his grip. But still he squeezed, relentlessly, remorsely, forcing the dregs of life drop by reluctant drop from her glorious body.

It happened with only an instant's warning. Janice was lax in his hands, unconscious, though not yet dead. Faintly, through the pounding and the rushing of the blood in his ears, Trevor heard the sound of a door being flung open. But warning of danger did not come until he caught the clatter of swift footfalls behind him—and then it was too late. Lights exploded before Trevor's eyes as something smashed violently into the back of his head. Then, with a great swoop, the lights went out.

CHAPTER XVII

AWARENESS returned to Trevor by slow degrees. He opened his eyes, then shook his head to remove the last writhing tendrils of dark fog from before his vision. The movement brought fierce pains that flashed and clanged in his brain.

After a moment he realized that he was bound securely with a length of plastoid rope to the metal chair in which he sat. He tested his bonds, but they held and his efforts awoke new agony in his throbbing head. He desisted, looking about him.

He saw that he was in a small storeroom which he recognized as adjoining the laboratory. The walls were lined with shelves upon which rested instrument cases, bottles of chemicals, coils of wire, bars of metal, and various other items of equipment and supplies which he made no effort to identify. The door was of metal, looking very solid, and there was no knob on his side of it. He knew the door would be tightly locked. There was a small window set high in the wall opposite the door.

The wheels of thought spun faster inside him. He knew what had happened that he should be here. Janice, as he strangled her, had thrown her waning energy into a brief, desperate telepathic summons to Lille. Trevor had tried to prevent just that, but had failed. Lille, responding to the silent mental call, had knocked Trevor unconscious. Trevor wondered why he had not been killed outright. Then the answer came to him—the details of the positron blaster. Janice and Lille wanted them. They could not kill Trevor until they had the plans of the blaster in their grasp.

Time crawled by like a sluggish insect. The window brightened slowly until at last a shaft of autumn sunlight pierced the room. Trevor's mouth became thick and clinging with thirst.

At last came the rattle of the knob in the other side of the door. The panel opened a crack to reveal Lille's hawkish, dark features. He gazed expressionlessly at Trevor a moment, black eyes glinting in the light from the window. Then he opened the door wider, and Trevor saw that he gripped a machine-pistol in one slender, long-fingered hand. The figure of Janice moved into view. She wore a bright green dress, and her blue-gleaming,

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black curls were held back from her face by a green ribbon. Her throat was bandaged. Her face was pale and her violet eyes were narrow slits of hate.

"Awake, eh?" Lille said. "Glad I didn't kill you with that crack over the head, though you had it coming for what you tried to do to Janice."

Trevor did not look at Lille, but beyond him and at the girl. "I'll try it again if I get the chance."

She said nothing. She touched her bandaged throat, and her lips thinned, and her eyes widened a trifle then narrowed again.

Lille gestured with the gun. "Come now, let's not be unpleasant. Look here, Trevor, we could have killed you, but we didn't. We gave you a chance, and if you blast on our course, we'll forget what happened. Now there's something we want—the details of the positron blaster. If you'll give them to us, we'll release you with enough money to keep you in luxury for the next ten years."

"And if I don't?" Trevor suggested.

LILLE shrugged, looking regretful. "In that event, I have other ways of getting the information from you. But look, Trevor, as evidence of my basic sincerity, I'm giving you the opportunity to divulge the information of your own free will. I could torture you, or I could extract the knowledge from you telepathically."

"What would happen to me then?"

Lille expressed surprise. "Why, nothing. Janice and I would still let you go—without the chance to make a profit, however, as you would if you told us voluntarily. We have no intention of killing you. We're rather sorry for you after what happened, in fact."

Trevor smiled humorlessly. "Lord, but you must think I'm simple! Or is it that you and Janice are essentially simple yourselves? I've had cause to wonder of late if Mutie minds, for all their wonderful intelligence, were not yet so high-strung and sensitive as to verge in times of emotional stress close upon insanity. Lille, you know very well that whether or not I give you the details of the blaster, you could not release me because of the danger of my warning the Norms. And you must know very well that Mutie and Norm minds can meet in contact only with difficulty, and that I can easily keep my knowledge hidden from you, if I wish. As for torture, if I have to die in the end, I guess I can accept also the fact of dying slowly."

Lille studied Trevor for long seconds, his hawkish, dark face baffled. Then his features became set and cold with new purpose. He turned abruptly to Janice. He did not speak, though Trevor knew some message flashed between them. The girl now produced something which she had been keeping out of sight—a glittering hypodermic syringe, which she handed to Lille.

Lille turned back to Trevor. "You thought you had me stalemated. You're wrong. I still have a trick up my sleeve—this!" He gestured with the hypodermic syringe, its long needle shining wickedly. "You were correct in saying that Mutie and Norm minds can meet only with difficulty, that a Norm can hide if he wishes such knowledge as he desires. But the situation isn't hopeless. The liquid in this hypodermic"—again he flourished the needle-tipped syringe—"is a drug invented by certain Muties to destroy Norm resistance to mental examination. The information obtained this way won't be as clear as if you had offered it voluntarily—but it will do. Janice and I will be able to fill in any

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gaps."

While still speaking, Lille stepped suddenly close to Trevor, the hypodermic moving in a glittering arc. Trevor tried to overturn the chair in which he sat, but was not quick enough. The needle bit into his arm, and holding Trevor now with his free hand, Lille shoved the plunger home.

The outlines of the storeroom began to writhe and twist before Trevor's eyes as the drug took effect. He lunged against his ropes in frantic efforts to fight off the approaching stupor. It was futile. A gray haze settled slowly and inexorably about him, and he was floating in it, weightlessly, gently. He knew nothing of what happened after that.

THE window of the storeroom was growing dark when the gray haze finally lifted and he felt the aching weight of his body again. He looked around. He was alone. Janice and Lille had gone, and the door was once more locked.

Realization came to Trevor chillingly of what must have taken place during his period of blankness. Lille had read the blurry print of his mind and now had the plans of the blaster—or at least a good general idea of its details, from which after experimentation he could build a successful working model. Trevor knew he was no longer needed. Janice and Lille in all likelihood were awaiting his return to consciousness before they killed him. He did not fear death, but he did not want to die until he had removed the menace of Janice and Lille forever from the world.

He did not doubt but that the two constituted a very real danger. When Lille had appeared with a machine pistol at the door of the storeroom, Trevor had instantly become fully certain that his theory regarding the reasons for the desire of Janice and Lille to obtain the positron blaster was true. To Trevor, Lille's possession of a weapon was proof enough of deadly intentions. He knew that Lille would have had no reason to come, armed, to his new job at the laboratory. He could have secured the weapon on one of his trips to the city only after his and Janice's plans had been made to obtain from Trevor either through guile or force plans of the blaster.

Purpose intensified by anxiety formed within him. He had to free himself of his bonds and escape from the storeroom before Janice and Lille returned. Then and only then would he be in a position to oppose them.

He struggled against his ropes until they cut painfully into his flesh. Perspiration broke out on his face. His breath came in laboring gasps. But his efforts were unavailing. The plastoid was too strong to stretch or break.

His gaze darted despairingly about the storeroom, settled on a shelf, on a level with his eyes, upon which rested several containers of chemicals. Among them was a dust-covered, small bottle of acid. His heart leaped a dizzy chasm. Acid would weaken the plastoid of the rope.

But how to get the bottle off the shelf? It seemed hopeless.

Then, on the same shelf, but further away, he noticed a ringstand. An idea suggested itself flashingly. His legs had been bound about the knees and ankles, though not to the chair itself. In a sort of sitting hobble, he inched the chair with painful slowness toward the ringstand. Reaching it after what seemed centuries, he began to slide it along the shelf with his chin, at the same time creeping back to where he had started. His heart pounded breathlessly. Livid in his mind was the

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knowledge that Janice and Lille would soon return.

At last the bottle of acid was once more on a direct line with his eyes. Carefully he tipped the ringstand over on the shelf. He gripped the support rod in his teeth and maneuvered the edge of the base toward the bottle. With his crude but efficient hook, he pulled the bottle from among its neighbors and to the edge of the shelf.

He paused, panting. His ears strained in the direction of the laboratory. Assured after long seconds of listening that it was empty, he knocked the bottle from the shelf with a sharp blow of his head. It burst with a crash of glass on the floor three feet away. Droplets of acid showered Trevor's legs, and a thickening snake of it began to squirm toward him.

Judging positions carefully, Trevor now tipped over the chair in which he sat, taking the force of the fall on his shoulder. There was still no sound from the laboratory. His bound hands splashed into the acid, and he bit his lips against the abrupt searing pain. He jerked his hands away, then moved them so that only the plastoid rope touched the corrosive liquid.

MORE centuries lagged past. Finally the plastoid gave, and he freed his burning hands. With a glass fragment, he sawed the ropes which bound his legs. He stood up, bandaged his hands clumsily with strips torn from his blouse, then moved his arms and legs to restore circulation to his cramped muscles.

After a while he turned his attention to the window. He decided it was wide enough to permit of climbing through. He moved a packing box beneath it, climbed up, and unfastened the catch. It was a tight fit, but he wormed through and dropped to the ground outside.

Only a few red streaks in the west were left of the Sun's descent below the horizon. Trevor stood on the grass at one end of the garden. To his left was a small hangar, and on the small square concrete landing space rested a gyro. Trevor regarded the gyro very thoughtfully. He could take it, escape, and warn Norm authorities against Janice and Lille. But would his story be credited and acted upon? He decided it wouldn't. It was too fantastic, the tale of a man obviously gone mad. And if he left, Janice and Lille would discover his escape and flee the house. They could not risk the chance that Trevor might after all be able to obtain Norm action against them. It would be an almost impossible task to locate them once they had hidden themselves away. By the time he did, it would be too late. A Mutie organization would already have been built up and plans of the positron blaster widely circulated.

Trevor faced the grim conclusion that any steps he took against Janice and Lille would have to be taken immediately. But what could he do? He was unarmed, and all to vivid in his mind was the memory of Lille's machine pistol.

On an impulse, he went cautiously to the west window of the laboratory and peered through. The room beyond was lighted, evidently by the automatic switch device, activated by the approach of dusk. Janice and Lille were not present.

As he looked into the laboratory, Trevor's eyes chanced upon a small atomic power engine. He started to glance away, but in the next instant his eyes were drawn back by a sudden idea. A slight adjustment in the protective mechanism, he knew, would make the engine explode like a bomb.

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And it could be timed so that he would have a margin of safety sufficient to reach the gyro and escape before the blast.

It would take only a moment. But if in that moment Janice and Lille returned— Trevor shrugged. It was a risk he had to take.

A series of lower panes in the window were partially open. Trevor forced one of the panes wider and slipped through. He went swiftly to the atomic engine and opened the control chamber. Removing two of a set of insulating force field coils, he closed the chamber again and stood up. He listened a moment, body tense and throbbing, the breath coming lightly and rapidly through his lips. All he had to do now was press the starting switch, leave the laboratory the way he had come, and depart in the gyro.

Its protective force field weakened, the atomic engine would explode some ten minutes after being started. It would not be a complete atomic explosion, for the remaining portion of the field would muffle the blast. But the blast itself would still be terrific enough to destroy utterly the house and all its occupants. Of these there would be only Janice and Lille, since the secretary and the few servants usually left before evening. And as the house was remotely located, it was unlikely that the explosion would injure others in the vicinity.

TREVOR pressed the starting switch. The faint hum of the atomic engine lifted through the quiet of the laboratory. Then he went to the windows. Gripping the edges of the pane which he had forced, he swung out a leg, started to duck his head.

The door to the laboratory opened. Trevor heard it open, heard two sharp cries. Involuntarily he turned, still in the act of bending. Janice and Lille stood in the doorway, staring in dismayed surprise. For a frozen, timeless interval, they gazed at each other across the length of the room. Then Trevor's eyes darted to the machine pistol, lax in Lille's hand, and movement returned to him with a sudden screaming sense of urgency. He got his head through the pane and began frantically to draw up his other leg.

There was a dull *r-r-r-rrrp!* of sound, the tinkling of shattered glass. Something like a white-hot blade cut into Trevor's legs at the thighs. Agony flamed through him convulsively. He doubled up, his grip loosening on the edges of the open pane. Then as his legs went numb, he slipped sideways in the window, caught for support, failed, and fell back into the room.

He lay still on the floor, the blood roaring and hissing in his ears. Outlines wavered crazily before his eyes. He sunk his teeth deep into his lips, fighting for clarity.

The outlines steadied. With a sudden, new vividness of perception, he found himself looking up at Janice and Lille.

Lille's sharp dark face was strained, and Janice's violet eyes were very wide. She still wore the green dress, and the green ribbon still bound back her raven hair. She held a sheaf of papers in her hand.

Slowly, as Trevor watched him with an odd sense of detachment, the strain went from Lilles' face. He smiled thinly. "That was close," he whispered, black eyes laughing suddenly at Trevor. "Close! Another minute and you've had gotten away."

"That wouldn't have been good, would it?" Trevor asked quietly. Everything was so strangely bright and clear. He heard the almost imperceptible hum of the atomic engine, and there

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seemed to be colors that he had never noticed before. He could smell the crisp autumn fragrance of the garden outside.

"It wouldn't have been good," Lille said. His black eyes still laughed.

Trevor glanced at Janice. "I was right, then, about your reasons for wanting plans of the positron blaster?"

She nodded slowly. The shock had left her, and in her violet gaze a coldness seemed to struggle with a lingering regret. "You were sight, Stan." Her voice was low. "But you shouldn't have tired to oppose us. We were willing to offer you a chance."

"I couldn't betray my people, Janice."

"Nor could I neglect an opportunity for mine." Her tone rung with abrupt fanaticism. "Stan, your people failed in the very first struggle. Jim and I have the plans of the blaster." She gestured with the sheaf of papers. "And that automatically gives us all future victories."

"The government has plans of the blaster in its secret archives, Janice," Trevor pointed out.

"Yes, but the government will cease to exist before it can use them. We're going to take the world by surprise, Stan. Once Jim has been made immortal, we will have unlimited time in which to organize and prepare. The Norms will never realize their danger until it is too late."

"We have the whole thing carefully planned out in advance," Lille put in. "We already have the nucleus of an organization. We'll gradually enlist other Muties, branch out until we have agents in every country of the world. It will take time, of course, but Janice and I won't have to worry about that."

"Doesn't it occur to you," Trevor asked, "that a world-wide overthrow such as you plan is absolutely unnecessary, as far as the social problems of the Muties are concerned? There are no problems as yet. And in the years to come when there finally will be, many solutions will be found. There are other worlds in space, for example." He had to keep talking, had to keep Janice and Lille talking, too, so that the slight hum of the atomic engine would remain unnoticed. It wouldn't be long now.

"Why should we leave Earth?" Lille demanded. "It is our birthplace, and ours also by right of superiority."

"But what of the Norms? Have they no rights?"

LILLE shrugged his slender shoulders. "The Norms are just ignorant cattle. They'll actually be far better off under Mutie leadership."

"As slaves?"

"If necessary," Lille answered coolly. "We might try to bargain with them, but if they prove as obstinate as you . . . well, we shall have no other recourse than to exterminate them entirely." Lille made a sudden impatient gesture with the machine pistol. He looked a telepathic message at Janice.

Janice looked at Trevor, violet eyes darkening. She moistened her lips and her body stiffened. Then she turned with an abrupt jerky motion and walked to a far wall of the laboratory. She stood there with her back turned. The room became silent save for the very soft, almost imperceptible, hum that hung in the air. There were quick little pauses in the humming now.

Lille looked at Trevor, black eyes intent, sharp features set and a little pale. He raised the machine pistol. His intentness took on a ginger, anticipatory quality.

The world was very vivid now—so vivid it hurt. Faces and scenes from the past kaleidoscoped in Trevor's mind like shadows thrown by a flickering

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light. Annette and Betty and Dave . . . August Hausmann: *"You are—immortal."* . . . Chad Barton: *"Why don't you grow old?"* . . . the lights of London glowing through fog . . . Paris in the springtime . . . Marta and Ken and Kathie . . . Marta: *"What are you?"* . . . Susan and golden fields of wheat rippling in the wind . . . the star-flecked vastness of space . . . a sandstorm on Mars. . . . And all the old hurts and fears came back to him in one great wave, numbing him for what was to come. Suddenly he didn't care. He had a feeling almost of relief.

Forever was so long—too long when counted in terms of heart-break and loneliness, worry and disappointment. Too long. . . . Even the stars eventually went out. He wondered if the stars felt the same peace at their going which he felt at his.

The quiet waiting. Lille's finger tightening on the trigger of the machine pistol. The intermittent humming, louder now and faster.

Then—Lille stiffening, listening. Lille darting a puzzled, searching glance around the room.

And then—shrill piercing whines from the atomic engine. A roar of sound too vast to be heard, a mighty hand that descended in a blow of supernal fury. A great white light that all too quickly went out, leaving darkness and nothingness, no thinking or feeling—forever. . . .

THE END

DESCENT FROM THE CLOUDS

By JUNE LURIE

HOW many of us have watched birds glide earthward and wondered how it must feel to drop through the air at a slow speed being able to observe everything with one's full faculties? Even the smallest baby is fascinated by this wonderful phenomenon of the abilities of our feathered friends. Through the centuries men have dreamed of performing such a feat. Ancient man may have pondered over this idea, but he must have also been confronted with the questions of "how does one get up into the skies? How could man defy the laws of gravity to the extent that he would be able to reach the very clouds?

In France in 1776, two brothers accomplished this feat after years of trial and error. With hot air pumped into huge cloth bags, they developed the first device to carry them into the heavens. At last man was able to glimpse the earth from a distance, and this was something that had never been done previously. Another Frenchman, Sebastian Lenormand, endeavoring to devise a safe method of fire escape, leaped from a lofty tower unharmed using an apparatus that must have resembled an over-sized umbrella. Plucky Lenormand landed without a scratch. He considered himself quite a hero to have developed what he called the first portable fire escape. Thus the first parachute came into existence!

Some years later, about ten to be more exact, the people of Paris gathered to watch an amazing feat. It was not especially breath-taking to see a balloon soar into the sky as this had been happening from time to time in the past decade. The balloon began to rise and reached the roof tops and then made its way higher and higher into the stratosphere. Everyone watched and many wondered about all the excitement. There was a strange looking apparatus dangling below the balloon basket. What could it be? Suddenly, after the balloon had risen to a great height, the queer little addition dropped away from the main part of the sky vessel. And even more remarkable, this object did not fall like an ordinary object going through space. Instead another part of it, rather umbrella-like, appeared and these two parts glided slowly earth ward. The daring man who made this amazing flight through space is credited as being the first parachutist. His name was Andrew Jacques Garnerin. As a result of his safe return to earth after a visit to the higher regions, many others were spurred on the road to developing the parachute.

The French are credited with having discovered both a way of ascending and descending to and from the clouds. In our modern age man has achieved remarkable advances in aviation. We can reach the sky in a few moments by merely stepping into a silver-winged bird and soar into space easily and comfortably. Man has achieved one of his greatest desires. He is as free as a bird; he has loosed the chains which once bound him to earth.

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YOU CAN'T SCARE ME!

by CHARLES F. MYERS

Toffee knew that Marc Pillsworth was in trouble again, so she came out of his subconscious mind to help him.

WHETHER or not they had passed through the portals of Earl Carroll's, the girls that threaded their way daily through the offices of Marc Pillsworth's advertising agency were undeniably some of the most beautiful in the world. It was probably this abundance of beauty, more than anything else, that caused Marc to shun the more seamy things in life. It was this also that made it so doubly unbearable that, nine times out of ten, every time his office door opened, it was only to admit to his presence one of nature's most vulgar experiments with American womanhood. What Marc, by marrying Julie, had gained in a wife, he had quite certainly lost in a secretary.

Miss Quirtt closed the door primly and turned to face Marc—very easily the nastiest thing she could possibly have done to anyone. As always, just to add stark horror to the picture, she smiled and revealed to her unappreciative employer that she had accomplished the extremely doubtful triumph of whitewashing the old fashioned cow catcher, without, in any way, detracting from its accustomed appearance of upswept grandeur. The proof of this lay in the sudden appearance of her amazing teeth. As the tight, dry skin of her face drew back to reveal this hideous accomplishment, it was hard to believe that the accompanying creaking sound that echoed through the room, was only a trick of the imagination.

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Marc and Toffee stood petrified as a claw-like hand and wizened head crept into view

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"Yes, Mr. Pillsworth?" she inquired, and thereby added to this already astonishing display of hideosities, the horror of her voice, which held all the melody of a palsied hand searching vainly for the key of E on a rusty guitar.

Marc shuddered and quickly turned his gaze to a strip of oak paneling which had suddenly become, to him, an object of indescribable loveliness. He had only lately come to know why Julie had insisted on the employment of Miss Quirtt. The very qualities which he now found so repulsive had been, to his wife, the attributes that made the woman so desirable for the job. It might as well be admitted that Julie had become unreasonably jealous of Marc's association with a group of girls that seemed to her, pretty stiff competition for the most glamorous "Glamour Chorus" in town, let alone herself.

"Well," Marc said with false heartiness, "today is the day, Miss Quirtt. Will you please bring me the layouts for the Reece campaign? I'm going to submit them this afternoon. You have the key to that file, I believe?" He tried hard not to hear her answering rasp, and heaved a sigh of relief as he heard the door close; the signal that this horribly jarring note had once more, at least momentarily, gone out of his life.

When she returned, it was not quite so bad. This time, he had the contents of the brief case to distract him. It was important that the layouts be complete. His hands ran over them almost lovingly—a full year's advertising material for the most sensational medical product ever to be offered to a suffering public.

OLD Gregory Reece really had something this time; a cure-all to end all cure-alls, and one that was the real McCoy into the bargain. It did everything that the old-time medicine doctor claimed, and a good deal more, as well. And that was the very thing that made the drug's initial presentation to the public so difficult. It was too wonderful to be true.

Reece had been cagy in asking all the agencies to submit advertising campaigns. That way, he would be certain to get just the right publicity slant, since this was easily to be the largest account to be had by any agency, ever. It would "make" the agency that got it, and quite likely break the ones that didn't. The firm handling this Reece product would be able to pick and choose the rest of its clients, and Marc was well aware that if the Mayes Agency, his most formidable competitors, beat him out on it, they would hesitate considerably less than a second to pick and choose the very accounts which he, himself, was now handling. However, he was not disturbed. The campaign that his boys had turned out was just the ticket—honest, imaginative and convincing. Besides that, he was already handling a number of other Reece products with considerable success. Confidently, he slid the material back into the brief case and rose from his chair. It was then that he noticed that the room was still haunted by the spectre of he outer office.

"Is there something else, Miss Quirtt?" he asked stiffly.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Pillsworth called to say that she would meet you here for lunch."

"You told her that I would be out, didn't you?"

"No sir."

"What?"

"I didn't tell her, sir." Miss Quirtt shrilled half-wittedly. "She always makes a fuss about those things. She always thinks that you. . . ."

"I wasn't aware that Mrs. Pillsworth

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was causing you so much trouble," Marc cut in sarcastically. "I'll have to speak to her about it. In the meantime, Miss Quirtt, call her back and say that I'll be tied up in some very important business during the lunch hour."

There was sincere concern in Marc's eyes as he picked up his hat and left the room. Julie's jealousy was fast becoming an office scandal. Something would certainly have to be done about it, he thought, as he hurried through the outer office, down the steps, and out, onto the sidewalk.

This ugly facet in Julie's, otherwise completely beguiling nature, still had a firm grip on his thoughts as, at the sound of the traffic signal, he stepped from the curb, into the street. The city, in this quiet, pausing moment, just before the noon rush, seemed almost too serene. In the mid-day sun, the usually busy intersection had become almost unnaturally still. Perhaps it was this stillness that made the scream appear so dreadfully shrill.

It was a scream that, like a certain cough medicine, came with a three-way action—ear-splitting, hair-raising and nerve-wracking. Marc stopped short, and spun quickly around to discover the source of this dismaying performance. What met the eye didn't match up at all. He wouldn't have been a bit surprised to have seen a banner stretched across the intersection with the query, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" written across it.

At it was, the girl simply stood there on the sidewalk and yelled her head off, for no apparent reason whatever. If there had been a man with an evil looking glint in his eye, running either from or toward her,—it made no matter which—there might have been some reason for this wretched recital, but there was not. Suddenly, the girl unbelievably increased her volume and pointed directly at Marc. It was then that he heard the automobile behind him. He turned just in time to receive a montage impression of flashing chromium, black enamel, and spinning wheels,—all headed squarely in his direction.

WHAT happened after that was a bit confused, except for the one clear fact that the pavement, apparently overcome with a mad desire to have a better view of Marc's face, was rushing impetuously toward it. It may have been this topsy-turvy indifference to the natural laws of gravity that dislodged the manhole cover, but whatever it was, a dark, black hole had instantly appeared in the center of the street, and Marc was unaccountably plunging, head first, into it.

As he descended into the thick darkness of the hole, he had no sensation of fear, however. He was falling slowly, almost floating downward; and his occasional contact with it, told him that he was moving through a sort of cylinder, the wall of which was of a consistency that brought to mind a sort of soft sponge rubber. Indeed, he had almost begun to enjoy his mishap, when he came easily to rest on what apparently was the bottom. This time, his hands came in contact with a different substance. He seemed to be lying on a small plot of grass.

As though his landing there had been the signal for it, a thin rim of bright light appeared evenly around the bottom of the dark tube, and began to widen steadily. As Marc looked up to discover down what passage he had come, he realized that it was withdrawing into what appeared to be a cloudless blue sky, and instantly his attention was drawn to his immediate surroundings.

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There was something familiar about the tranquil little valley, with its emerald greenness and its soft blue mist that gave everything a shimmering chiffon-like softness. It was like a place long forgotten that, once remembered, would surely recall happy memories. Marc got to his feet and turned to the tree that stood, alone and lovely, behind him. Then, suddenly he started back in alarm. The tree seemed to have given bud to a pair of extremely well shaped legs.

"Well, it's about time!" Toffee said shrewishly, peering out at him from the foliage. "You've no idea how bored I've been, just sitting around in this awful stately mind of yours. I don't see how you can stand the silly thing, yourself. Don't you ever think of anything off-color, — something I could really get my teeth into?"

Marc stared at her in dismay as she swung lightly out of the tree. Her red hair, caught by the breeze, seemed like flame.

"Good grief!" she continued fretfully. "I've been sitting around up here, waiting for you, for so long, I've nearly got middle-age spread."

Marc quickly closed his eyes as she prepared to prove this statement. "I'll take your word for it!" he cried hurriedly.

Toffee's deep green eyes suddenly came alight as she grinned. "Oh, all right, you hypocritical old Puritan," she said affectionately. "Now that you're here, I might as well admit I'm glad to see you again." She started toward him. "Kiss me and say hello,— in that order."

Marc's hand was instantly raised in defense. "Oh, no!" he cried. "We're not going to have any more of that! It just leads to trouble."

Toffee looked grieved. "You haven't changed a bit," she said disappointedly.

"And that isn't all," Marc replied evenly. "I'm not *going* to change, either. When I think of the way you messed things up for me last time,* my flesh fairly crawls. You're going to have to sit this one out alone."

Toffee smiled mysteriously. "Don't you bet any money on that," she said confidently. "Anyway, it won't hurt anything if we just talk over old times, will it?" She motioned toward the tree. "Let's sit down. You look tired."

Slowly, and definitely against his better judgment, Marc started in Toffee's direction, then suddenly he stopped short.

"Run! Run!" boomed the voice. It didn't seem to come from anywhere in particular. It was just in the air. Even the mist seemed to stir under its heavy tone. "Run! Run!" it repeated, and Marc, not knowing clearly why, felt an impelling urge to follow its commanding advice.

Suddenly, in the grip of an unknown panic, he was running without direction or reason, until, in the influence of an impulse, he looked back, over his shoulder.

The black cylinder, now flexible, was twisting and turning after him, gaining on him at every step. Frantically, he increased his speed. In spite of the disturbing presence of Toffee, now that he had found his way back to the peaceful valley, he was reluctant to leave it. He tried desperately to dodge, as he saw the mouth of the dark passage almost directly overhead, yawning threateningly. Then, resignedly, he knew it was no use. It had followed him, and was already shutting away the light of the valley.

"Run! Run!" the voice continued

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* Reference is made to a previous adventure of Toffee and Marc Pillsworth, which appeared in the January issue under the title: "I'll Dream of You."—Ed.

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vainly, but edging its way through, was also the voice of Toffee.

"Wait! Wait for me!" she screamed, and suddenly, impetuously, Marc was holding a hand out to her through the remaining free space.

All of a sudden, the tube closed over them with a dreadful sucking sound, and they were being lifted upward, Toffee clinging to Marc desperately, as though for her very life. The upward journey, thought Marc, was to be very like the descent, except for the accompanying sound of the voice, as it repeated over and over, "Run! Run!"

"HIT and *run,*" someone was saying. "This guy was on the wrong end of it. Got it right in the middle of the street. According to his identification, his name is Pillsworth. He's not really hurt, just bruised up a little."

Then, a door closed somewhere, and a distinctly antiseptic smell was whispering to Marc that he was in the receiving room of a hospital. He lay still and kept his eyes closed for a moment. His head had become the uneasy heir to a dull throbbing feeling.

After a moment of silent consideration, he opened his eyes and then closed them quickly. He could have sworn that he'd seen Toffee smiling down at him. But that was impossible! It couldn't possibly happen twice in one lifetime to the same man,—not one that drank as little as he did, anyway. In another moment, however, a pair of warm lips were pressed firmly against his own, to tell him that it not only could happen, but had. In a mood of utter helplessness, he did not resist.

"Well, that's more like it!" Toffee said happily.

Marc immediately became starkly upright on the slab-like examination table, and at once, Toffee's wayward mode of dress was forcibly recalled to him. She still wore the same filmy, transparent scrap of material, and it, for its part, still seemed to cling to her remarkable figure reluctantly, as though having urgent business elsewhere. It was a material that could conceivably be put to a wide variety of uses, but it was unfortunate that not one of these uses was, in the remotest way, connected with the coverage of the human body.

"You — you — you — No!" Marc sputtered incoherently.

"No?" asked Toffee.

"No! You can't be here!" Marc gasped. "It isn't right! You'll just have to go back to where you came from."

Toffee's expression swiftly became tha tof the patient martyr. "Do I have to explain it to you every time?" she asked. "You know perfectly well that I've materialized from your subconscious, and I can't possibly return until the proper time—whenever that it. I promise faithfully to disappear when you sleep or lose consciousness—then I have to go back—but until my mission is accomplished, I have to keep right on materializing during every one of your waking hours. I do wish you'd get used to the idea."

Marc winced perceptibly. "Your mission?" he asked.

"Of course," Toffee said. "You men are all alike,—just a pack of selfish dogs. You must have needed me for something or you wouldn't have dreamed me up again."

"But you can't stay this time," Marc wailed. "I'm a married man now."

"Oh, don't let that bother you," Toffee said reassuringly. "I don't mind a bit. In fact, I think it's lovely for you to be married."

Marc leaned defeatedly back on the table and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, no—no," he murmured mourn-

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fully. Then, he sat up quickly as a voice sounded from just outside the door.

"Is this the right room?" it asked. "Is this where you put Pillsworth?" Then there followed a silence in which another unseen being apparently answered.

"Holy smoke!" Marc whispered. "You've got to get out of here! If they find you in here, like that, all hell will break loose." His eyes searched the room frantically and finally came to grateful rest on a white cloth covered screen in the far corner. He pointed quickly to it. "Get behind that!"

"What for?" hissed Toffee, placing a slender hand defiantly on a round, smooth hip. "Why do you always want me to hide just when a man comes around?"

"Don't argue!" Marc said threateningly. "Get behind that screen!"

"Oh, all right," Toffee pouted, "but I think you're just a kill-joy."

SLOWLY, she crossed the room, and slid behind the screen, just as the dor opened to admit one of the tallest internes Marc had ever seen. In his white uniform, he looked like one of the chalk cliffs of Dover, and his ruddy face might well have been the sun rising over that cliff.

"Well, Mr. Pillsworth!" he called with hateful professional joviality. "I see that we're up. How are we feeling after our little accident?"

"Were you in it too?" Marc asked dryly, but the young man was not to be set aside with so trivial a rebuke. He, with his silly smile, thought Marc, had probably attended patients for years that hated his very guts.

"We were very lucky," the fellow continued offensively.

"Were we?"

"Yes. You haven't really been hurt at all. According to the report, you've no internal injuries, and only a few bruises that won't show at all, since they're located . . ."

"Never mind!" Marc cut in hastily, glancing toward the screen. "I'll find out where they are for myself."

The interne lounged his way across the room, and dangerously rested his arm on the top edge of the screen. Marc wondered if he were going to have a relapse. He almost wished he were still unconscious.

"I—I'll be permitted to leave the hospital, won't I?" he asked shakily.

The young man nodded. "You're perfectly all right. You'll just need to take it easy for a day or so. We might have kept you here for observation, but the hospital is too crowded. We tried to call your wife, but she was out."

"Fine!" said Marc. "And where is my brief case?"

"Brief case?" the fellow asked stupidly.

"Yes. Brief case. The one I was carrying when I was hit."

"But there wasn't any."

Marc felt a rush of terror which subsided almost immediately. It had probably been taken back to the office. After all, his name and address was all over the thing. Then, once again, his heart leaped to his throat, and the brief case was forgotten, as he saw the interne's hand slip lazily behind the screen. Marc needn't have worried himself about what was going to happen, for it happened instantly, and no one could have prevented it anyway.

The young man's red face turned an extravagant shade of deep purple, as his anguished cry rang out through the room like a call from the damned. Moaning wretchedly, he bent double and pressed his injured hand between his knees. The screen tottered drunkenly for a moment, and then clattered

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to the floor to reveal Toffee engaged in a half-won battle to wedge herself into a stiffly starched nurse's uniform.

The fire of virtuous outrage that blazed in Toffee's eyes, as she stepped over the screen, forcing her arm through a reluctant sleeve, clearly implied that, compared to her, Elsie Dinsmore was nothing more than a loose living slattern.

"You bit me!" the interne wailed.

"You bet I did!" snapped Toffee. "And next time you come groping around where I'm dressing, with those great hammy paws of yours, I'll gnaw them off clear up to the elbows!"

In the face of such heated self-righteousness, the young man could hardly doubt her statement. Obviously, he was being tormented by the picture of himself, continuing, armless, through the remainder of his life. "I'm sorry," he said contritely, apparently forgetting that, in view of the excellent nurse's quarters just upstairs, the indignant girl had chosen a rather singular place to dress.

"You should be," Toffee replied icily. "If it happens again, I'll report you." And without waiting for an answer, she started regally from the room.

"Button that dress!" Marc yelled inadvertently.

"Button your lip," Toffee replied composedly, disappearing around the edge of the door.

Marc wished desperately that he could go after her. There was no telling what she might do. He only knew that, having Toffee back, was merely a matter of traveling the shortest road to utter confusion at the highest rate of speed. He shivered at the thought of what doubtlessly lay ahead.

AS MARC swung out of the hospital door, the last brilliant rays of a dying sun almost blinded him for a moment, and he didn't see Toffee, at first, sitting there on the steps, chin in hand, and looking very much like a completely thoughtless rendition of "The Thinker."

"What kept you so long?" she asked irritably.

"I had to sign some papers," Marc explained. "It's too bad that no one got the license number on the car that hit me. It would have. . . ." Suddenly, he stopped, and stared at Toffee, mouth agape. The white uniform that he had last seen her in had miraculously been replaced, in part, by a black evening gown, that had obviously seen hell at the ruthless hand of its cutter. It had hardly a back to call its own, and as for the front, instead of covering Toffee's amazing figure, it seemed merely to draw a heavy black line around it for emphasis.

A look of pain came into Marc's eyes. "Where did you get *that?*" he asked weakly.

Toffee motioned vaguely across the street. "At that store over there," she answered serenely. "I charged it to you."

Marc groaned. "What was the matter with the uniform? I thought it was very neat."

"Wasn't it, though?" Toffee replied disdainfully. "It's no wonder all the people in the hospital are sick. It's enough to make anyone ill, just having to look at a woman all trussed up in one of those starch ridden atrocities." She pivoted on the steps, and a shimmering black cloud moved gracefully above her lovely legs. "Isn't it a dream?"

"Yes," Marc said emphatically. "A perfect nightmare. You look like something that should be raided and hauled off to headquarters. Why, if Julie . . ." A sudden chill lodged itself in his spine. "Holy Smoke! Let's get out of here!"

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Unceremoniously, he took her by the arm and rushed her down the length of the steps to a taxi that was luckily standing idle in the hospital drive. As they approached it, an aged head, looking not unlike a mildewed melon, jutted from the driver's window, and two faded eyes widened with surprise. From wrinkled lips, a thin whistle sounded feebly into the dimming day.

"That's what I like about this world," Toffee said, getting into the cab. "Everyone seems so happy. At least the men do. They're always whistling."

"OH, I remember this place," Toffee said, as Marc opened the door to the agency.

"I wish you didn't," Marc said flatly. "Without a memory, you're a terror, with one, you're a positive menace." He swung the door wide and motioned toward the steps. "Get in there, out of sight."

"And waste this beautiful dress?" she asked disappointedly. "I thought you were taking me out somewhere."

"You were wrong," Marc said shortly. "And besides, that dress has already been wasted until there's hardly anything left of it. It's indecent."

"Yes. I know," giggled Toffee, starting up the steps.

For a moment, they continued in silence, until Marc suddenly stopped short. There was a light burning just beyond the head of the stairs. "Wait a minute," he commanded. "Miss Quirtt is still up there. The efficiency of that female is enough to make your blood run cold, and she's got a mind like a clogged up cesspool. If she gets a load of you in that dress, it'll be a public scandal by morning."

"What are we going to do?" asked Toffee.

Marc considered this for a moment, and came to a decision. "We're going on up," he said determinedly. "But you'll have to stay behind me. Stick to me like wall paper."

Toffee nodded enthusiastically. Sticking to Marc like wall paper seemed to be her fondest dream. She stood aside to let him pass.

The minute Marc stepped into the outer office, into the presence of Miss Quirtt, he realized the error of his instructions to Toffee. In her effort to stick to him, she was also treading on his heels, and Marc, never too surefooted, anyway, found himself romping helplessly across the office with all the self-conscious abandon of a performing porpoise. Miss Quirtt, still at her desk, looked up in alarm, her pale eyes filled with wonder.

"Mr. Pillsworth!" she squeaked.

Marc, without answering her, lunged drunkenly toward the door to his office, like a drowning man grasping for a life line. Reaching it, he drew it open, careful to continue facing Miss Quirtt, and swung his free arm behind him with all the feeble strength he had left. A soft rustling sound told him that Toffee, willy-nilly, was safely out of sight. He said a silent prayer of thanks as he noted that the office was dark.

"Hello, Miss Quirtt," he said, smiling stiffly. "I just dropped in to pick up my brief case."

"Your brief case?"

Unexpectedly, from behind, slender fingers were digging lightly into Marc's ribs, and all of a sudden, he was giggling helplessly. "Ye—yes," he simpered like a feeble minded school boy. "My—my brief case!"

His hands crossed violently in midair, and came down to his sides with a resounding slap. Miss Quirtt, taking all this in with horrified eyes, seemed in acute danger of leaping over her desk and making a run for it.

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"*Mister* Pillsworth!" she cried.

Marc immediately sobered, as the fingers withdrew. "I was parted from my brief case in an accident," he explained hopefully. "I thought it might have been returned here."

"He's been parted from a lot more than his brief case," Miss Quirtt murmured desperately to herself.

"Well," Marc demanded. "Is it here or not?"

"It is not," the miserable woman answered decisively. "And what's more, Mr. Reece called to say that if you didn't have your campaign in his office by morning, it wouldn't be considered." She seemed almost glad to announce this piece of bad news.

Marc's expression became darkly grave, and then unaccountably, it seemed, changed to one of high-hearted glee, as the unseen fingers played lightly over his ribs for a second time. Miss Quirtt clutched frantically at the edge of the desk to keep from slipping to the floor.

"You do that once more," she gasped, "and I'll scream!"

The anoying fingers withdrew, and Marc's eyes filled with distaste. "You needn't," he said evenly. "You couldn't be safer, believe me." As he swung about, to slam the door after him, however, he caught a glimpse of the dreadful woman, scurrying out of the office like an unbalanced scorpion.

IT WAS a mistake that Marc started across the room without first turning on the lights, for his very first step brought him in violent contact with Toffee, and the darkened room instantly became the sounding board for a series of scrambling, grunting noises that were far from reassuring.

"Let go of me!" Toffee shrieked as she hit the floor.

"Get your heel out of my ear, and maybe I can," Marc rasped furiously. In the ensuing mad scramble to let go of each other, they became so helplessly entangled that finally, in desperation, they both gave up. It was in this edifying moment that the room suddenly became ablaze with light.

Marc looked up to find Toffee sitting rigidly upright on his chest, her gaze directed at a chair across the room, her eyes filled with horror.

For an awful moment, the room became starkly silent, as Julie rose from the chair and stared down at them. Her blue eyes gave Marc a graphic description of a glacial age that he had thought long dead. The light flashed in her blond hair, as she lowered her face to Toffee's.

"Get off my husband, you nasty little harpy," she rasped.

Dazedly, Toffee did as she was told, and Julie turned her attention to Marc.

"And as for you, you double dealing ogre; get up off that floor and stop looking like the less intelligent half of a seal act. And you needn't bother saying that she's your cousin, either. I've heard that one before. Even *your* family couldn't produce anything that depraved. She probably has a police record that would stretch from here to Shanghai."

"I have nothing to hide!" Toffee put in elegantly, refusing to accept this blot on her character.

Julie's answering gaze lingered malignantly on the black dress. "Lucky for you," she said caustically. "You'd be in a really rotten spot for it, if you did."

"But Julie! You don't understand!" Marc cried, disentangling his long legs, and getting uncertainly to his feet.

"I've understood for longer than you think!" Julie cried angrily. "I've always suspected that this sort of thing was going on around here, and when

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you broke our luncheon date, I thought I'd come down to find out the reason. I knew if I waited around long enough, something would turn up."

Marc turned beseechingly to Toffee. "Tell her," he pleaded. "Tell her I'm a good husband."

Toffee, flattered at being invited to take such an important part in this domestic drama, turned beamingly to Julie. "You just don't know what a wonderful husband you have," she announced innocently.

"I daresay," fumed Julie. "And someday, when you're not too exhausted from frisking around on the floor with him, suppose you drop around and tell me all about it!"

"She doesn't know what she's saying!" Marc cried.

"Don't ever tell her," Julie said with false sweetness, "or you'll ruin some of the liveliest testimony ever written into a court record."

"Court record?"

"The divorce courts *do* keep records, don't they?"

"Divorce!"

The echo of Marc's cry was still in the air, as Julie crossed to the door.

"Yes. Divorce, Marc Pillsworth!" she said, turning back. "And I do mean you."

"But—but you haven't any grounds," Marc said hopefully.

"Don't worry about that," Julie replied, opening the door. "By the time I get to court, I'll have more grounds than a national park."

The slam of the door put a very definite end to the discussion.

MARC and Toffee stared dumbly at each other as the angry tap of Julie's heels, retreating through the outer office, and down the stairs, sounded dimly back to them through the closed door. Toffee dropped limply into an upholstered chair and drew her feet up under her.

"I just can't understand it," she said contentedly. "I just can't understand how your mind could be so dull when your life is so exciting."

"Oh, my life is a perfect scream," Marc smoldered. "Only I save up the good parts for when you're around to enjoy them. They seem better that way."

"You're sweet, Marc," Toffee replied sincerely.

Marc looked at her unbelievingly. "I just don't know how it happened," he said quietly. "Except for that hideous old crow out there in the main office, everything was perfectly tip-top this morning. Now, all of a sudden, my wife is suing me for divorce, my most important advertising copy is missing, and if I don't find it by morning, my business is just as good as ruined. Where did it all start?" He dropped dejectedly into the chair behind his desk and rested his chin in his hand. Once again the room became silent.

"It was that blonde," he said absently, after a moment.

"What blonde?" Toffee asked suspiciously, peering from the depths of her chair.

"The blonde that screamed. She was a decoy. She double crossed me."

"They'll do it every time," Toffee said firmly. "Now you take a redhead . . ."

"Never mind that," Marc said pensively. "She started screaming long before she could possibly have seen the car from where she was standing. She drew my attention away deliberately, so I'd be sure to get hit. I'm sure of it. She probably took the brief case, too. Maybe she was hired for the job. Good grief! If that's true, I'm really in a spot!"

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"They'll do it every time, those blondes," Toffee repeated doggedly.

"I'm sure my brief case was stolen," Marc said, almost to himself. "I've got to find that blonde. And in the meantime, just to be sure, I'd better have he boys knock out another campaign tonight." He turned to the telephone and started to dial feverishly.

After fifteen minutes of assorted telephone conversations, Marc turned to Toffee dispiritedly. "It's no use," he announced. "Every last one of them has been called out of town for the weekend. I've never talked to so many simple minded wives and landladies in all my life. They haven't any idea where any of the men are. They would pick a time of crisis to start their weak-minded cavorting."

"Who would want to keep you from having the Reece account?" Toffee asked.

"The Mayes Agency," Marc answered promptly, and then shook his head. "But Mayes wouldn't do a thing like this. He's hard as nails when it comes to business, but he wouldn't do anything criminal, and I might have been killed by that car this morning. What am I going to do now?"

HIS question was promptly answered by the shrill ring of the telephone. He picked up the receiver disinterestedly, and before he could give his name, a sultry feminine voice sounded over the wire.

"This Marc Pillsworth?" it asked.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Don't you mind who this is, Buster," the voice said evenly. "Just you listen to what I got to say, and don't interrupt. If you want your brief case back, you be at the Southlawn Cemetery at eleven sharp tonight."

"What!" Marc yelled. This was a great deal more than he'd expected.

"Yeah," the voice laughed. "It's just like a kidnapping. In other words, if you want to see your brain child, alive and healthy again, you be at the cemetery, like I said, with a million dollars in cash."

"A million!" Marc choked. "But that's impossible!"

"Yeah. I know," the voice replied conversationally. "It's the craziest thing I ever heard of, myself. I nearly died laughing when they told me. It's impossible to raise a million in one night—even with a full moon. I know. I tried."

"But—but—" sputtered Marc.

"No but about it, Buster," the voice said. "Them's the orders. And, oh yes, at the risk of soundin' corney, I gotta tell you to have the bills in small denominations and unmarked. Ain't that a scream?"

Suddenly the phone went dead, and Marc looked up dazedly. "I just can't believe it!" he groaned. "I must be dreaming."

"What's wrong," asked Toffee, "that isn't already?"

"I—I've been kidnapped," Marc said wonderingly. "I—I mean, they're holding my brief case for ransom."

"Who is?"

"I don't know. It was a woman that called. Probably the blonde. She was undoubtedly paid off to make the phone call, too. I'm pretty sure it's someone else that has the copy."

"But the blonde is a lead," Toffee pointed out.

"Yes," Marc agreed. "I've simply got to get ahold of that girl."

"You go around, getting ahold of any girls," Toffee warned, "and I'll be down on you like the wrath of the Gods. You'd better hire yourself a detective."

Marc stared at her thoughtfully. "That's not a bad idea," he said finally.

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"Of course it isn't," Toffee replied proudly. "You stick to me, and I'll have everything straightened out in jig time."

"Jig time," Marc corrected automatically, drawing a soiled newspaper from his desk drawer. For a moment, he thumbed through the wrinkled sheets, and then folded it back at the classified section. His hand traced slowly down the print filled columns for a time, then quickly darted to the opposite page.

"There she is!" he yelled.

Toffee glanced suspiciously about the room. "Where?" she demanded.

"Here!" As Marc held out the newspaper, his finger indicated an advertisement in the entertainment section.

"The Loma Club," it read, "Where you can loose a weekend and never miss it." Under that curious legend was the picture of an over-lush blonde young lady, whose name, according to the ad, was Ruby Marlow. The picture had apparently been taken during one of her performances at the club, for her mouth was mide open. Toffee gazed at the picture critically.

"That's just the way she looked on the street," Marc said.

"I don't think you were hit by a car, after all," Toffee said sourly. "A face like that would stop anything."

"Well, at least we know where to start," Marc said enthusiastically. "We're going to the Loma Club. A detective would take too long."

"Night clubbing?" Toffee asked happily. "Wait till I find me a club. I remember the last time. It was heavenly."

"This isn't going to be like the last time," Marc said sternly. "If you start another riot, I'll break your neck with my own bare hands."

THE inner sanctum of the Loma Club appeared to be more a murky den, designed especially for barbaric rituals, than a place for relaxation and entertainment. To confirm this impression, the orchetra platform, when in use, proved to be nothing more than an altar, upon which a tinny group of exhausted, down-and-out musicians offered up, in horrible, though bloodless sacrifice, the popular tunes of the day. High priestess of these gory activities, and hiding under the title of "vocalist," was Ruby Marlow. At the moment, she was holdng a battered microphone in a death grip, that may, or may not, have accounted for the nerve-wracking, strangled sounds that were issuing from it. To Marc and Toffee, sitting at a table in a dark corner, the amplification of Miss Marlow's horrible mouthings, was simply incredible.

"Lose a weekend?" Toffee said bitterly. "You'd fairly murder the poor thing in here. In fact, the whole atmosphere in this place is pretty murderous." She shoved her glass disdainfully away. "When I want embalming fluid, I'll go to a mortician. But come to think of it, maybe the waiter knows best, after all. One more of those, and I'll be dead as a flounder, anyway."

"I wish I hadn't even tasted the first one," Marc said morosely. "I keep seeing things."

"What sort of things?"

Marc pointed to a vacant table about a yard from theirs. "I think it's haunted," he said. "I keep seeing a little man down there. It's awful."

Toffee looked in the direction he indicated: "I don't see anything," she said reassuringly. "It's just an ordinary table with a table cloth on. . . . Suddenly she stopped speaking, and turned frighteningly pale.

Slowly, a scrawny hand appeared at the edge of the cloth and lifted it. Then, as if that weren't enough, a wrinkled ferret-like face jutted from under it,

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peered out querulously for a moment, and quickly disappeared. This singular performance was followed by a series of quick clicking sounds that were totally inexplicable.

"Lord love me!" cried Toffee. "I saw it too, and it was horrible! Is that all it does? Just peer out and click at you?"

"Isn't that enough?" Marc answered dumbly. "It's happened three times now."

"Maybe he's a bashful castinette player," Toffee suggested uncertainly.

"I don't think so," Marc answered gravely. "I think it's the liquor. If I start to order again, stuff your napkin down my throat."

They both had become so engrossed in the phenomenon of the adjoining table, that neither of them noticed the approaching Miss Marlow. That the murderess of innocent songs was full blown, was unmistakable even at the distance of the microphone, but close up, she looked like something that should be turned on side, and hung over a bar.

"You Mr. Pillsworth?" she asked lazily. "One of the boys says you want to talk to me."

"That's right," Marc said, looking up. "Please sit down." He gestured toward Toffee. This is Miss—uh—Miss

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"Don't embarrass yourself Mr. Pillsworth," cut in Ruby, turning an appraising eye on offee. "I know the type. They don't come with names—just sizes." She smiled maliciously. "And what's yours in mink coats, dear?"

Toffee's answering gaze dwelt indolently on Miss Marlow's expanding hips. "About five smaller than yours in girdles, hon," she said sweetly.

With all the callousness of the seasoned warrior, Ruby accepted this retort, and eased the objects that had inspired it into a vacant chair. She leaned forward and smiled at Marc.

"What can I do for you?" she asked coyly.

"I like your singing," Marc lied with apparent irrelevance.

"I'm so glad to hear it," Ruby was all graciousness as she said it.

"For the first time in your life," Toffee appended viciously.

"But I like it even better in the open air," Marc said evenly. "Your street singin ; left me with quite an mpresson."

GONE were the days of Ruby's innocence, but she wasn't above trying to look lamb-like when the occasion seemed to demand it. She did so now. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Okay," Marc countered, "we'll skip that, but who were you working for?"

"You heard me," Ruby said, trying to look indignant. "I don't know what you're talking about. From where I'm sitting, it just sounds like the wind whistling through the holes in your head."

"Stop the kidding," Marc demanded. I know you took the brief case, and I intend to have it back. Where is it?"

"Search me!" said Ruby.

"If he does," put in Toffee, "I'll scratch his eyes out."

Ruby turned on Toffee a searing gaze that knocked in her teeth, tore the gown from her back, and left her bent and bleeding in a dark alley. "I'm getting out of here," she announced, pushing back her chair. "You're both nuts."

It was Marc's guess that the flambuoyant Miss Marlow would probably be considered a flop in her own social set without a police record, and took a chance on it. "Just a minute," he said. "There are a few boys on the force that would like to know where you are,

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since you've dyed your hair, and if you don't level off right now, I'll have them on you like a swarm of flies."

Ruby settled back in her chair immediately. "Okay! okay!" she said. "You don't have to yell about it. I'll tell you the whole thing. After all, I was only hired to go downtown and yell like crazy, and pick up any loose brief cases I happened to see lying around. There's nothing illegal in that."

"Who hired you?"

Ruby glanced nervously around the room, and then suddenly smiled. "All right," she said pleasantly. "I'll tell you. You see that guy sitting over there? The rough looking bird in the opposite corner,. That's Manny Groute, the racketeer. He hired me."

Marc glanced briefly over his shoulder and shuddered. Manny Groute was the sort of fellow no one would ever suspect of having had a mother. He seemed to have been assembled, rather than born. In front of him, the table looked like a delicate foot rest.

"What does he want with my brief case?" Marc asked uneasily.

"Search me," Ruby said easily. "The ransom I suppose."

"You ask him to search you just once more," Toffee broke in menacingly, "and I'll break your bottle of peroxide."

"That's enough!" bawled Ruby. "That's the shot that got me! Stand up, and I'll tear that red hair out by the roots! And don't think I can't do it, either. I've got Irish blood in my veins!"

"And if you'd like it splashed all over the floor, where you can show it off better," Toffee flared, "just start something!"

Ruby, an affable creature by nature, and always open to suggestions of all kinds, took Toffee at her word, and lifted her none too daintily from her chair.

"Stop that!" yelled Marc, and rushing to the struggling women, took a bare shoulder in each hand. No sooner did he have them parted, than, as if by magic, a huge, meaty hand fell on Marc's shoulder and nearly weighted him to the floor. "Oh, murder!" he murmured as he looked up into the terrifying face of Manny Groute, which, at the moment, bore an expression that did little toward inspiring open-hearted confidence and trust.

"You named it right, bud," Manny rumbled ominously. "I don't like guys pawin' my girl friend."

IN THE following moments, Ruby and Manny looked like rather grotesque members of a water ballet, as, in perfect unison, they held their victime at bay, and drew back their fists. To anyone else, in Toffee's very potent position, Ruby's doubled fist would have been an item of consuming interest, but to Toffee, it was a forgotten detail, as her attention fell on the acrobats that were the current floor show attraction. It was the first time she had ever seen a human pryamid being formed, and that so many well developed masculine bodies should appear all in one clump, seemed to her, the most wonderful spectacle in the whole world.

If Toffee was oblivious of her coming fate, however, Marc was not. Indeed, as he glimpsed Manny's mammoth hand in the impressive process of doubling itself, he found himself regretting his oversight in not reserving a room while at the hospital that morning. He had a strong hunch that he would shortly have need of it. It was then that the unexpected happened.

Swiftly, a claw-like hand jutted from beneath the next table and grabbed Manny's thick ankle. In another sec-

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ond, Marc felt the racketeer falling against him, and the two of them were headed for the floor like a couple of felled pines. Instantly, for Marc, everything went black.

In the meantime, Ruby, in her determination to do a really bang-up job on Toffee, was giving her blow all the careful aim, and driving power it would need. Squinting, she sighted Toffee's right eye, and let go. It was precisely in this moment that Marc's head struck the floor and Toffee vanished into thin air.

The man on the flying trapeze had nothing on Ruby. She sailed gracefully through the air and came quickly to a skidding stop on the top of a nearby table, at which sat two of the club's more befogged patrons.

"Perfect belly landing!" one of them cried delightedly. "Smooth as glass."

"Just like a dame," complained the other, seeing the incident in a different light. "Not satisfied with yelpin' her horrible yellow head off at us up there, she's got to come over here and knock over our drinks."

Ruby boosted herself dazedly to one elbow, and gazed malevolently at the two. Daintily, she picked up a remaining beer bottle and dispatched them to the floor in attitudes of idyllic slumber.

"That'll teach you to talk about a lady," she mumbled quickly, and with that, silently collapsed.

It was in this restful atmosphere that Marc regained consciousness, and for a moment, as he rolled the still unconscious Manny from his chest, he had highly colored thoughts of atomic bombs and such. Then, reassuringly, the wild applause of the more awake customers of the night club, came to his ears. He got to his feet to discover the cause of their noisy enthusiasm.

On the dance floor, there was the most remarkable human pyramid anyone had ever seen. It wasn't so much the acrobats themselves, although they were a fairly curious looking lot, it was the girl in the black evening dress that sat casually on the shoulders of the top-most man. Toffee had not only materialized, but had chosen her spot for doing so, as well, and from the spectator's point of view, the affect had been pretty astounding.

"Smartest trick I ever saw," one seedy little man mumbled to himself, "but I'm dogged if I can figure how they got her up there so fast."

Another guest of the Loma, already dazed by drink, gazed wide-eyed at the spectacle, and slipped blissfully under the table. "I'd have broke me pledge long ago," he murmured, coming to sodden rest on the floor, "if I'd known I was going to start seeing dames like that. It sure beats the snakes."

But successful as the glorious tableau was, like all good things, it was destined for an early end. However, it might have continued longer, if the "Base" acrobat, upon whom the rest were depending for their support, hadn't become curious about the audience's sudden approval of the act. Usually, at this stage in the performance, a noticeable chill descended on the club.

IT IS hard to say what the fellow expected to see, as he turned his head awkwardly to look above him, but judging by subsequent developments, it is a pretty safe guess that it was not a redhead in a dangerous black evening grown, lounging radiantly on the shoulders of his partners, graciously blowing kisses to the audience. To say that the man was shaken, is to tell the whole story.

There was a dreadful series of whacking sounds as the forces of gravity worked swiftly to bring the entire act

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to an untimely end. As for Toffee, she alone descended gracefully, looking much like a streamlined ballerina, knocking off the swan after a busy day in the woods. As she bowed in the spotlight, the audience went nearly crazy with loud appreciation.

"I knew they couldn't hold it long," she said breathlessly, rushing up to Marc. "They're not as strong as they look."

"Never mind that!" Marc yelled. "Let's get out of here, before Ruby and Manny wake up. If they get ahold of us now, they'll tear us to ribbons."

"But, I thought you wanted to talk to Manny about your brief case."

"I don't think he'll be feeling very conversational," Marc rasped, grabbing Toffee's arm, and shoving her through the crowd. "Besides, he doesn't know anything about it. That was just a gag. All I'd get out of Manny would be a fractured skull. That's what Ruby was counting on."

"But what are we going to do now?"

"There's only one thing to do," Marc said, glancing hastily at his watch. "It's nearly eleven now. I'll have to go to the cemetery and try to make a deal."

"Is a cemetery anything like a night club?" Toffee asked excitedly.

Marc glanced back at the unheeded litter of prostrate figures that graced the Loma Club. "Quite a bit like this one," he said wryly.

TOFFEY settled herself comfortably on an ornate tombstone, and leaned languorously back to rest her head on the buttocks of a stone cupid."

"Get down from there," Marc said sternly. "You look obscene."

"In this moonlight, you're no work of art, yourself," Toffee replied lazily, making no effort to move.

Marc shrugged helplessly, and seated himself watchfully at the base of the stone. "It's past eleven," he murmured. I wish someone would show up. If I don't get that copy back, I might as well kiss my business goodbye right now."

"Maybe Manny's got it after all," Toffee suggested. "And he's still out."

"I don't think so. And speaking of him, I'd sure like to know who the little man under the table was. He just about saved my life when he grabbed Manny's ankle." Marc glanced around peering intently into the darkness that, except for occasional patches of bright moonlight that filtered through the trees, was all around them. "It looks like we're all alone here with the spooks."

"What are spooks?" Toffee leaned forward, interested.

"They're something like you," Marc said absently. "Sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't. Anyway, I understand they're always raising hell with somebody."

"They sound fine," Toffee said. "How do you go about stirring up a few?"

"Never mind," Marc replied, "we wouldn't have time for it, even if you could. Besides, no self-respecting spook would have anything to do with you. He'd rather be caught dead."

"Oh yeah?" Toffee said unexpectedly. "I'll bet I'm looking at one right now."

"Nonsense."

"If you don't believe me," Toffee said woundedly, "just look over there."

Humoring her, Marc turned his gaze in the direction that she had indicated, and suddenly froze. A claw-like hand was moving stealthily around the edge of a nearby head stone, and the effect was something worse than ghostly.

Transfixed, Marc watched it as it came to rest at the foot of the stone, and was suddenly followed by a wizened

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head. Marc tried hard to suppress a gasp of astonishment as he identified the ferret-like face as the same one that had appeared beneath the table at the club. He had only a moment in which to recognize it, for as before, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared, to be followed by the clicking sounds, that now echoed weirdly through the cemetery.

"Oh, that's not a spook," Toffee said disappointedly, and then, on second thought added, "at least I don't think it is."

"You bet it isn't," Marc cried, jumping quickly to his feet. "That's probably the guy that's got my brief case!" Swiftly, he took a step forward, caught his toe on a low marker, and sprawled, head long, into a landing that was all grin and gravel. His breath unhesitatingly rushed out to meet the night air, and apparently liked the company, for it didn't bother to come back for a while. In the ensuing stillness, hasty footsteps could be heard making their way out of the cemetery.

"Well, that's that, I guess," Marc groaned moroely, then he had regained his breath. "I scared him away, and he was my last chance. And to think that he was right next to us in the night club all the time!" He sat up and rested his chin defeatedly in his cupped hands. "With my wife gone, and my business gone, I might just as well go away and try to forget it all right now."

"Maybe you could go where those other men went," Toffee said in a baffling attempt to be helpful.

"What other men?"

"The ones that work for you. You said they'd gone cavorting, and that sounds pretty forgetful. Did they have something to forget?"

"No. They all got urgent telegrams."

"Who from?"

"How should I know?"

For a moment, neither of them spoke, and then, all of a sudden, Marc's chin lifted, and his hands fell to the ground. "I'll bet that was a frame up too," he said. "It was! I'm sure of it! Whoever has my brief case, sent those wires to get the boys out of town, so they couldn't get out another campaign. They're all out on a goose chase."

"Then all we have to do," Toffee said brightly, "is find out who sent them. Then we'll know who to see about the brief case."

"Yeah. But how?"

"Call up their homes again."

"It might be an idea," Marc said, his hope rising faintly. "Come on down from there. We'll have to find a drug store with a telephone."

With a shockingly familiar hand, Toffee grasped the cupid, and boosted herself away from her perch. "Let's go!" she cried gaily, landing lightly beside Marc. "I don't like this place much, anyhow. There isn't enough life in it."

IN THE drug store, Toffee had just finished her third soda, and the teen aged fountain attendant, chin on counter, to have a better view of her, had just completed his fiftieth blissful sigh. He'd never seen so dazzling a creature anywhere, before. Suddenly, they both looked up as the door to the corner telephone booth burst open, and Marc came hurrying out.

"I've got the name," he said excitedly. "It was a Mr. Polasky, whoever that is. A few of the wives I talked to, said their husbands didn't know who it was either, but left because the messages were so urgent. It's my guess that the name's a phoney."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said, as though

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just realizing it for the first time. "Good night! It's just another dead end, isn't it?"

For amoment, they gazed at each other worriedly, as the boy, overcome by his consuming curiosity about Toffee, edged closer.

"I have it!" Toffee cried suddenly.

"What?" yelled Marc and the boy simultaneously. Marc turned witheringly on the youngster, and he moved away again.

"I know what you can do," Toffee continued, pausing long enough to reassure the boy with a radiant smile. "You call up the telegraph company, and tell them you're Mr. Polasky. Tell them that you were expecting answers to the wires you sent and you still haven't received any. Then ask them to check to see if the wires were really delivered and check back with you. When they say they will, ask them to check the address and telephone number they have written down for you, and insist that they read it to you, just to make sure. That way, you'll know where Polasky lives, anyway,—or whoever it is."

Marc stared at her in amazement for a moment. "I don't know if it'll work," he said, "but it's certainly worth a try. Toffee. You're wonderful!" He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm pretty darned surprised, myself," Toffee replied happily. "I'll say it all over again, if you'll kiss me again." But Marc was already on his way to the phone booth.

Toffee turned to the boy and shrugged. "I don't know what he'd do without me," she said, her voice heavy with theatrical weariness. "I simply don't know!" Then she smiled as the boy leaned his chin back on the counter and sighed.

MARC paid the cab driver and turned to regard the apartment house questioningly. "I didn't expect anything quite so shabby," he said.

"Are you sure this is the number you got from the girl at the telegraph company," Toffee asked.

"Positive," Marc replied. "Well, we can be sure of one thing, at least. Mayes wouldn't be living here. I'll bet he's never ever seen this part of town." A small frown creased his forehead. "Maybe it's just another run around. Maybe Ruby sent the wires; she could have easily. I'd hate to run into her again."

"If it is Ruby," Toffee replied heavily, "I'll rip that yellow hair of hers out by it's black roots. Her and her Irish blood!"

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Marc said wearily, starting forward. Then, he stopped, as Toffee tugged at his sleeve.

"What if it turns out to be Manny?" she ask apprehensively.

Marc winced. "We'll just have to face him, I guess. Anyway, it might not be. It could be the little fellow that tripped Manny."

"Yes. I guess it could be," Toffee admitted. "Well, in that case, let's go."

INSIDE, the old apartment house held all the stale, musty smells of old cooking and all the other activities of daily, crowded living, and the gloom in it's hallways was almost angible. Slowly, Marc and Toffee, like a couple of conspirators, crept along the downstairs passage, pausing before each door to read its carelessly stenciled number. Presently, at the rear of the hall, where the gloom was the thickest, they stopped.

"Well," Marc whispered uneasily, "this is number seven. This must be it."

"Yep," Toffee echoed. "This must be it, all right."

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For a long moment, they just stood and stared at each other with apprehension.

"Well," Toffee said finally, "don't just stand there,—knock, ring a bell, —do something!"

"Don't rush me," Marc hissed irritably. "I'm looking for a name plate."

"Well, don't look at me. I'm not wearing one. Try looking on the door."

Marc, realizing the wisdom of her advice, turned his attention to the forbidding panel, and subjected it to a more thorough scrutiny than was absolutely necessary. All he needed was a magnifying glass to complete his impersonation of Sherlock Holmes on one of his more important cases. He was so close to the door, that when it suddenly opened, he nearly pitched into apartment number seven head first.

"I heard you snooping around out here!" a metallic voice shrilled above him. Marc could hardly believe his ears.

He had always known that, as long as he lived, he would never see a more horrible looking woman than Miss Quirtt, but now, as he looked up, he was dismayed to find that even she, this time time a prickly nightmare in pin curlers, had surpassed herself for sheer frightfulness. And just to complete the picture, there was a strange light in her pallid eyes, that he had never seen there before. The movie monsters would have to go a long way to match this, he thought.

"Nice of you to drop in," Miss Quirtt said, and her usual twangey voice had something else in it that was almost undefinable. "Might as well ask your girl friend in too."

From outside, Toffee was spared the alarming sight of Miss Quirtt, but the voice had already suggested to her what she might see, if the door were fully open. "I think I have to be running along," she said uncertainly. Thanks."

"I think you'd better come in," Marc warned shakily. "She's got a gun."

Toffee peered around the edge of the door and her face went starkly white. Her nose had almost brushed against the business end of a pistol that was almost as formidable as Miss Quirtt, herself. Then, unaccountably, as though remembering a joke, Toffee suddenly smiled and stepped into the room. "Well, if you really insist. . . ." she said breezily.

TOFFEE'S manner had an instant calming effect on Marc, and in the moment in which Miss Quirtt closed the door behind Toffee, he felt his sense of reality slowly returning. "Is this a joke, Miss Quirtt?" he demanded.

Miss Quirtt regarded him with a sidelong, hostile glance. "I'm not laughing, am I?" she shrilled.

"Then, what. . . ."

"You'd sure like to have your hands on that again, wouldn't you?" she gloated, gesturing toward a shabby table in the corner. On it, looking like a diamond in the mud, rested Marc's brief case. He started automatically toward it, but stopped short as, from the corner of his eye, he saw the gun swerve quickly from Toffee to him.

"Don't be greedy," Miss Quirtt said amusedly.

"I can't get a million dollars together right away," Marc began feverishy, "but I'll. . . ."

"Don't be silly," Miss Quirtt broke in, with a weird laugh. "I wouldn't give it to you for two million. And if you went to the cemetery, I hope you had a lovely time. I'm sorry that I couldn't make it."

"We saw your friend there," Marc said sourly, "but he got away."

"My friend?" Miss Quirtt's eyes rolled, and came dangerously close to

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crossing, in a futile attempt to express perplexity.

"Yes. The little fellow you sent; the one with the ferret face."

"That clicks," Toffee added helpfully.

Miss Quirtt looked at them unbelievingly. "I didn't send anyone out there," she said, her voice racing uphill, out of control. "I had no intention of going myself, either. That was just a touch of mystery to throw you off the track. I don't intend to give you that brief case at any price. Besides," she added thoughtfully, "I don't know any little ferrets that . . . that click."

"I wonder who it was?" Toffee said, deeply absorbed in the question.

The strange, fanatic gleam suddenly burned more brightly in the horrible woman's eyes. "I'm going to ruin you, Marc Pillsworth!" she announced dramatically, her stringy voice rising to such a pitch that it caused one to wonder if she hadn't studied bird calls at one time or another. Then she added as an afterthought, "And I think I'll kill you, too."

"But why?" Marc and Toffee chorused.

Miss Quirtt's eyes rolled again, this time in a painful attempt at coyness. "You promie you won't tell?" she asked foolishly.

Marc and Toffee exchanged a glance that held a full hour's discussion on the woman's mental status.

"Of course not," Toffee said persuasively. "Your secret couldn't be in safer hands."

"Well," Miss Quirtt said, becoming incongruously chatty, considering the formidable weapon in her hand, "I'll tell you all about it. It's all part of a plan, and it's terribly clever. I'm sure you'll think so." She paused to smile at them like a five-year-old about to recite a poem before company. "I've been working for big firms for twenty years now . . . and just working that's all. I've been watching my smug employers and their smug wives, going about their smug lives, never giving me a thought, for twenty years. Can you imagine what that can do to a sensitive woman, like me?" She turned pleading eyes on Toffee. "Has a boss ever made a pass at me?"

"No!" Toffee cried, catching the confessional spirit of the thing.

Miss Quirtt nodded approvingly. She seemed to like dramatic effect. "Has a boss' wife ever been jealous of me?" she screeched.

"No!" Toffee cried again, recognizing her cue.

"THAT'S right," Miss Quirtt continued sadly, brushing a tear away from the end of her nose with the muzzle of the gun, then promptly leveling the weapon directly to Marc's heart. "They never have. So I decided to ruin the lot of them." She turned back to Marc. "You're not the first one," she said, beginning to brighten. "There have been many others. I used to work for Mr. Burke."

"The . . . the Mr. Burke that committed suicide?" Marc faltered.

"That's right," Miss Quirtt anwered proudly. "That was one of my most poetic projects. Mr. Burke found himself with a lot of worthless stock on his hands one morning, and simply jumped out the window. He died without ever knowing who had bought the stuff for him. We parted the best of friends. He left me one of my very finest references . . . along with the suicide note."

"It did end well, didn't it?" Toffee put in blandly.

"Yes. It was just lovely," Miss Quirtt agreed. "Much better than the job I did on old Mr. Grant. He didn't

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leave me any reference at all, and I had to write it myself. How I hate forgery! Of course, it may not have been entirely his fault. After all, they did rush him something awful when they came to take him away to the asylum." A dreamy reminiscent look came into her eyes. "The job with Mr. Forbes was much better. He said some very nice things about me before he left for prison. I was the last one he said goodbye to."

Marc shuddered. "A very impressive career," he said, "but you can't get away with it this time. I know that it was you that stole my brief case."

"Yes," Miss Quirtt answered promptly. "And that's why I'm going to have to make corpses of you . . . so you can't talk, you know. It's really not my way of doing things, but I suppose that everyone has to make exceptions occasionally." She turned to Toffee and smiled. "I'm sorry to have to put you out of the way, dear, but you understand, I'm sure."

"Oh, perfectly," Toffee said helpfully, returning the smile.

Marc was beginning to wonder just how many of them were crazy, and in what combination. Even Toffee was making less sense than usual.

"And if I do say so, myself," Toffee continued. "Marc and I will make lovely corpses."

"Oh, indeed you will!" Miss Quirtt agreed enthusiastically. "Some of the nicest I've ever seen. And you'll be the very first ones that I've made all by myself. I'll be very proud of you."

"That's nice to know," Toffee said, "but you're not going to use that gun are you?"

"Why not?"

"It won't work," Toffee said simply. "You'd better think of something else."

Miss Quirtt looked at her suspiciously. "What do you mean, it won't work?"

"We hate to admit it, and we wouldn't to anyone else," Toffee said, "but Marc and I are a little odd in some ways. Guns don't faze us. In fact, there's very little that does. If you doubt me, shoot me, and see for yourself."

Marc's mouth started open in alarm, but closed again as Toffee winked at him.

Apparently Miss Quirtt was as open to suggestions as was Miss Ruby Marlow. "All right," she said agreeably, a shrewd look coming into her eyes. "Just stand over there."

TOFFEE followed her directions, and took her place before the wall, and near Marc, where Miss Quirtt could keep them both covered during the experiment. "Be sure you fire close up," she said. "I wouldn't want you to miss."

"Don't worry," Miss Quirtt said menacingly, leveling the gun at Toffee. "I won't." She squinted down the barrel, her eyes really crossing this time, and pressed the trigger.

There was a sudden flash of white light, and an explosion. A crack etched it's way crazily through the plaster just behind Toffee, but Toffee, herself, remained just as she had been, a composed, smiling figure in a scandalous black evening gown.

"You see?" she said. "You'll just have to think of something else."

Miss Quirtt stared at her, not seeming to be so much amazed as thoughful. "I'll have to think this over," she said pensively. "I had my heart set on making corpses of you, . . . being my first, and all, you know." She crossed to the door and locked it, keeping the key, then turned back to them apologetically. "I'm afraid I'll have to leave you

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for a while," she said. I'll have to dream about this. I get all my best ideas in my dreams."

"I'll bet you do," Marc said flatly.

She regarded the crack in the wall for a moment. "The landlord's going to make an awful fuss about that. He's so narrow minded. What's a home, if you can't shoot it up a bit once in a while?" She turned to Toffee. "It's rude of me, I know, to leave you alone like this, but I simply have to get to sleep right away, to think of some way to rub you out, as they say. You won't mind?"

"Certainly not!" Toffee replied grandly. "Go right ahead!"

As the strange woman started in the direction of the bedroom, Marc turned amazedly to Toffee. "She's crazy as a loon," he whispered.

"Balmy as a night in June," Toffee hissed back.

Suddenly Miss Quirtt whirled about. "I heard that!" she shrieked. I heard what you said!" She regarded Toffee regretfully. "And I thought you were such a nice, helpful girl, too. It makes me sad to know that you can't be trusted. Now I won't be able to enjoy having your corpse around, like I would have." She moved quickly to a closet, dragged out two straight jackets, and handed them to Marc and Toffee. Put them on!" she commanded, brandishing her gun.

"They're perfectly lovely," Toffee said sarcastically, struggling into hers. "They remind me of nurse's uniforms. Where did you ever get them?"

"Oh, I have dozens of them," Miss Quirtt said proudly. "And they were all given to me. Every time I go for a vacation, when I leave, they give me one of those. I remember a lovely summer at Bellview. The one you have on reminds me of it."

A few minutes later, Miss Quirtt surveyed her trussed up guests from her bedroom door, and smiled with satisfaction. "I think the gags were a nice idea, too," she said. "You'll have to be quiet, anyway, if I'm to get any sleep." Then, closing the door, she sighed, "Oh, but you'll make such lovely corpses. And I can hardly wait to have some of my own."

Silently, Marc and Toffee, their mouths uncomfortably full of Miss Quirtt's more intimate garments, gazed at each other mournfully.

IT WOULD be supposed that the last minutes of one's life would seem to pass with a terrible swiftness, but to Marc, it seemed that the minutes of the last two hours had dragged like the third act of a bad play, and he was certainly convinced that the morning would see him a corpse. And the fact that his lifeless body would receive all the personal care and attention due it, as the victim of Miss Quirtt's first murder, didn't help his state of mind as one might have supposed. He was not surprised that Toffee, during the last five minutes or so, had begun to behave peculiarly.

She seemed to be acting on a definite pattern, for she had repeated her little routine three times now, and it had always been precisely the same. She would leave her chair, walk directly to the wall, stand facing it for a moment, and then bend over at the hips, as though looking at something on the floor. This done, she would look up at Marc and nod her head toward the spot which she had been watching.

At first, Marc merely thought that it was nice that Miss Quirtt had left their legs free, if exercise meant so much to Toffee, but then, slowly, he began to realize that perhaps the nodding meant that Toffee had discovered something and wished him to follow

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her.

Walking to the wall, he waited until Toffee began to bend forward, and followed her example. Once down, he gazed at the floor intently, but there didn't seem to be anything to see, except a dismal section of very ordinary floooring. He looked up questioningly, but Toffee motioned him back again. This time, he gave the floor his undivided attention. He was determined to discover what it was that she had been looking at, and wanted him to see. At least it would give him something to think about, besides coming a dead body.

If Marc had seen Toffee remove herself from his side, to a position just behind him, he would probably have moved away from the wall like a flash, but since he did not, he remained just as he was, bent over, head to the wall, and p e r f e c t l y motionless. Toffee couldn't have asked a more willing victim, or a more perfect target..

Slowly, as she brought her foot to Marc's unsuspecting posterior, a pained expression crept into her green eyes. She hestitated a moment, made a few practice kicks for aim, then swung her foot quickly behind her. Sure of her aim now, she closed her eye tightly, and brought her foot forward with all the force of a sledge hammer.

There was a dreadful splitting sound as Marc's head struck the wall. As he dropped to the floor and rolled over, the blissful, foolish grin of unconsciousness was discernable even behind the gag. In the next second, the room had become deathly still.

AS MARC closed the door to Gregory Reece's office, he saw Toffee waiting for him near the elevator, and scowled. Somehow, in the morning light, the black dress seemed to leave even more of her exposed than it had in the evening. Undaunted, Toffee smiled brightly at the sight of him.

"Did he like the advertising campaign?" she asked. "Are you going to get the account?"

Marc nodded wearily. "Yes," he said in a dead voice. "He was very enthusiastic."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know," Marc replied sourly. "I could barely hear him. My head was roaring like a lion cage at feeding time." He turned to her fretfully. "Was it absolutely necessary for you to drive my head half way through that wall? If that landlord's to be sore about that bullet hole, he'll fairly scream his head off at the chunk of plaster I knocked out."

"I had to be sure," Toffee explained logically. "I had to be sure you'd lose consciousness, so I could return to your subconscious until you woke up. It was the only way I could get out of that straight jacket. You know that."

"Well, you could have told me, so I could have braced myself," Marc argued unreasonably. "You nearly broke my neck."

"With a gag in my mouth?"

No, I guess not," Marc admitted reluctantly. "But it seems that you could have tempered your blow a little, at least." He frowned as Toffee suddenly began to giggle. "What's so funny?"

"I was thinking of the desk sergeant, down at headquarters. When I materialized, I miscalculated a bit, and faded in right on top of his desk. He nearly had me locked up without even listening to what I had to say. I don't know when he looked more mixed up, then or later, when he got a load of Miss Quirtt in those curlers."

"Now that I've got the account," Marc sighed, "I wonder if it was all worth it."

"Of course it was," Toffee said. "I

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thought it was loads of fun!"

If Marc's eyes had really held the power that their expression suggested, the ceiling would certainly have been down around Toffee's flaming head with out out further delay. "Let's get a cup of coffee," he suggested helplessly. "My head's chiming like Big Ben at midnight."

"All right," Toffee agreed, reaching for the elevator button.

"No! Not that!" Marc yelled. "The way that young fiend in there operates that thing, I'd be lucky to get downstairs with the top of my head still on. Let's take the stairs."

As together, they started down the carpeted stairway, Marc became pensive. Even if the matter of the brief case had been settled, his trouble with Julie was still as bad as it had been the day before . . . probably worse, for all he knew. Then too, there was the problem of Toffee. Matters certainly wouldn't improve with her around. His troubled conjecture came to an abrupt end at the sound of Toffee's anxious voice.

"Look out!" she cried. "Look out for that tear in the carpet!"

"What did you . . ." Whatever Marc was going to say, was lost for good, as the toe of his shoe slipped under the torn carpet, for in the next instant he was flying, head first, down the length of the stairs, steps flashing past his face like box cars on a fast freight. Down and down he fell, on an on, and then, looking away from the stairs for a brief moment, he could see that he was heading into a dense, black fog, that obscured the bottom of the stairway.

As he drew close to this fog, it seemed to reach toward him and swallow him up, and then he found that he was falling through a great, unknown region, that was devoid of all light. He wondered where the floor had gone.

WHEN finally he came to rest, Marc couldn't calculate how long he had been falling; it seemed an endless period. Wonderingly, he sat up, and looked around him for some bit of light, some reassuring bit of brightness that would tell him he hadn't lost his sight. Even as he searched, however, the fog began to lift, becoming lighter and lighter, until there was nothing left if it except a soft blue mist. Immediately, his surroundings were familiar this time. The valley was just as comforting and lovely as he had remembered it.

"It hardly seems fair!" came Toffee's petulant voice, and turning, Marc discovered her standing just behind him.

"What hardly seems fair?" he asked, rising to his feet.

"That I only got to materialize for a single night this time. The way you bounce me in and out of your subconscious is a screaming crime. I suppose I'll have to sit around here for another eternity, just waiting for you to get into another scrape that you can't get yourself out of."

"That's right," Marc said, grinning at her affectionately. "Every time I find myself in a tight spot, I just say to myself, 'Well, Marc, old boy, it's time to drop in and pick up Toffee. Now, there's a girl that can really fix things up!" He stopped speaking and smiled down at her wryly.

"I'll bet you do," she pouted. "You just use me. Men are all selfish dogs."

"And don't you love them!" said Marc.

Suddenly Toffee grinned. "I guess I do," she laughed. "I suppose I'm just sore because it always come to an end so soon. It'll all be over in a minute now. Kiss me goodbye?"

"Naturally," said Marc, and took

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her tenderly into his arms.

After a long moment, he released her, and looked down to find that she was smiling up at him.

"And remember," she said. "Think of something off-color once in a while, so I'll have something to work on. Besides, it'll be good for you."

"I will," Marc laughed. "I'll think of you. That is, I'll thing of you when Julie . . ." Suddenly his smile faded into an expression of deep concern. "Julie! She's still going to divorce me! You're walking out on me, this time, before everything's settled."

"No, I'm not," Toffee said. "Everything will be all right."

"I believe you want me to be divorced!"

"Nonsense!" Toffee replied seriously. "You two love each other, and I wouldn't have anything happen to that for the world. Julie just needed something to jar her out of her jealousy, and I think she's had it. When you get . . ."

Toffee's voice trailed off into the distance, and Marc looked down to find that his arms were empty. She had vanished into the mist, it seemed.

"Toffee! Toffee!" he called, but there was no answer, and, all of a sudden, he felt dreadfully alone. His sense of loss was deep and painful. Then the voice broke through the stillness.

"Run! Run!" it boomed, just as before, and also as before, it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "Run! Run!" it repeated, more urgently this time.

Without questioning the reason, Marc began to run frantically, dodging this way and that, to avoid . . . he didn't know what. Then, with horror, he realized that, in his confusion, he had run in the wrong direction, for the black fog was directly in front of him, reaching toward him. Marc turned, but too late. Already, it was shutting out the soft light of the valley.

"Run! Run!" the voice continued weirdly.

"IN THE *runner,* there was a tear, lady," a strange voice was saying, "and he musta caught his toe in it. Anyway, we found him at the foot of the stairs. That's all I know about it."

"Well, thank you very much for bringing him," Julie's voice answered. "I'm sure he'll be very grateful to you when he wakes up."

There followed the sound of retreating footsteps and a door closing. Marc kept his eyes closed, and listened, until he heard Julie returning. Slowly, he opened his eyes and was glad to find that he was propped up in a chair in his own living room.

"Well!" Julie exclaimed annoyedly, seeing that his eyes were open. "So you decided to wake up ,after all, did you? The men that just dragged you in here said that you'd fallen down a flight of stairs. What a laugh that is! Dead drunk, and out cold would be more like it!"

"But I *did* fall down," Marc protested feebly.

"It's a wonder they didn't come hauling that vile little redhead in with you!" Julie said icily. "Where did she collapse?"

"But you don't understand about her," Marc said desperately.

"Hah!" snorted Julie, and the laugh that followed the inelegant exclamation was frozen solid around the edges.

"But Julie," Marc pleaded wretchedly. "I . . ."

"There's a gentleman waiting to see you, ma'am," Marie, the maid, interrupted. "His name is Mr. Dembert."

"Send him in here," Julie said, a grim smile forming on her lips.

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"If it's someone to see you," Marc said apologetically, starting to rise, "I'll just go to my room."

"Oh, no!" Julie cried. "This ought to be of great interest to you. I really wouldn't want you to miss it."

"Very well, he said apprehensively, sinking back into the chair.

In a moment, Marie appeared again in the doorway. "Mr. Dembert, ma'am," she announced, and swiftly disappeared.

Marc's eyes moved listlessly to the doorway, and then, suddenly froze on the man that stood there. It was the ferret-faced little fellow from the Loma Club and the cemetery. Marc flinched at the memory of the clicking sounds, and the man's mysterious behavior. Then, he was aware that Julie was watching him.

"I want you to know Mr. Dembert, Marc," she said smoothly. "He's from the Regal Detective Agency, and he had the pleasure of following you all last evening . . . if you can call it a pleasure. From what he told me over the telephone this morning, it must have been some night. He tells me that he even had to save you from a thug once—for the divorce courts, of course."

"A private detective?" Marc asked bewilderedly.

"I knew you'd be interested," Julie said with amusement, and then turned to the odd little man who had remained in the doorway. "Come in, come in," she called graciously. "I hope you brought the pictures?"

"Yes, I did," the fellow squeaked. "I picked them up only a moment ago and rushed them right over, without taking time to look at them myself." He moved with a mouse-like quickness across the room, and deposited an envelope in Julie's eager hand. "They're all there . . . the night club, the cemetery, the drug store, and the apartment house. You can see the address plainly on that last one, I think. I was right in front when I took it."

"Thank you," Julie said, turning to smile viciously at Marc. "Mr. Dembert photographed you and that red-headed trollop, dear, everywhere you went last night. The results ought to be mighty interesting to the judge."

MARC winced, as he saw Julie open the envelope and draw out the pictures. He closed his eyes tight. He couldn't bear to see what was going to happen when Julie saw them. There would never, on earth, be a way to explain them. It seemed that the room remained quiet for an eternity until Julie's voice unexpectedly cut through the stillness like a knife.

"Get out!" she screamed. "Get out of this house, and don't you ever try to set foot in it again! If you do, I'll have you thrown out! You . . . you . . . you dirty, lying, double-dealing cheat!"

Marc, sincerely wishing that he had done so earlier, rose slowly to his feet and moved in the direction of the door, without even bothering to open his eyes. Then, thinking that Julie must be behind him by now, he opened them and suddenly stopped short. Mr. Dembert, more mouse-like than ever, was scurrying toward the door in a fit of terror. Quickly, he skidded around the corner, and was out of sight. A split second later, the slam of the front door announced his final departure.

"But, what . . ." Marc stammered, turning to Julie.

As if he hadn't had enough surprises, he was suddenly presented with one more, that was even more confounding than any of the others. Julie's expression, as she came toward him, was one of absolute contriteness.

"Oh, Marc!" she cried. "Can you ever forgive me? I might have known

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you weren't out with that woman. The minute I got outside your office, last night, I knew I'd made a fool of myself, but I had to be sure. That's why I hired the detective. And when I thought you'd gone out with that redhead . . ." A flame of anger flickered briefly in her eyes. "And to think I let that little rat take me in with his phoney reports!" Again, she turned pleadingly to Marc. "Please say you'll forgive me?"

Marc stared at her, aghast, for a moment, wondering if he'd finally lost his mind, then his gaze darted to the scattered pile of photographs. Quickly he crossed over and picked them up, looked at them, and then, dropped them disdainfully to the floor.

"I'll think it over," he said severely, turning to Julie. "I don't know if I'll forgive you or not. You behaved very badly, I think. I'm going to my room to think about it, and I'll let you know my decisioon in exactly half an hour."

With that, he turned and strode majestically out of the room. Reaching the hallway, out of Julie's sight, he suddenly stopped and the grin that broke across his face, teetered dangerously on the edge of hearty laughter.

"I might have known, all along, that Toffee wouldn't photograph," he murmured. Then, he shook his head wonderingly and continued to his room.

It would be nice, he thought, just having lunch . . . in his own home . . . with his own wife.

SNAKES DON'T BITE

By R. CLAYTON

ALL of us are creatures of habit. And though often we know of no logical reason for some of our pet phobias, we merely shrug our shoulders and conclude that nothing can be done about it, and go on crossing the street to avoid cats, and shriek at the sight of a snake.

But some psychologists have been unwilling to let these harmful habits persist. They feel that much unhappiness could be prevented if harmful habits could be reconditioned in childhood. Mary C. Jones is one of these latter, and the results of her experiments form a fascinating and important part of the story of the discoveries of the mind. Miss Jones' experiments were carried out with seventy children, from three months to seven years old. All of these children showed marked fear of snakes, rabbits, rats, frogs, "scare" faces, or loud sounds.

First, Miss Jones tried to eliminate these scare habits by the method of disuse. She figured that if the child is shielded from coming into contact with the feared object, in time, the fear would gradually wear itself out. But this method did not work, though it was carried out for several months. For, it was only a temporary relief, and did not remove the fear itself.

Then Miss Jones tried out the common assumption of many parents that a child can usually be reasoned or talked out of his fears; that by telling stories about the feared object, the child's interest and curiosity would be sufficiently aroused to overcome his fear. This plan was tried with a five-year-old girl who was afraid of rabbits. Picture books of "Peter Rabbit," toy rabbits, and stories were used to create interest in real rabbits, but at the end of the treatment period, the girl's fears were as great as before, disproving this method of breaking undesirable habits.

Next, the method of distraction was tried. Every time a feared object was presented to a child, his attention was distracted by simultaneously giving him something which he liked. This time, results were much more encouraging. Though the fear was seldom completely overcome, it was definitely lightened.

Finally Miss Jones tried to train the children to associate something pleasant with the feared object. One of the ways this could be done was to put the feared object on the table on which the child's food had been placed, at a sufficient distance not to interfere with the child's eating, but close enough to keep the animal well in sight. At first the child would eat with a wary eye on the animal, but finally when he saw nothing had happened, his fear slowly diminished until he even came to reaching out and stroking the rabbit.

Next time you jump at the sight of a bug, or see ghosts in a dark room, remember it's a fear that can be eliminated. Just try these methods on yourself.

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Not As Plotted

by Guy Archette

Dave Naylor had trouble in plotting a story—so his characters began to work the story out for themselves.

THE check from Dave Naylor down at Eclipse Publications came in the afternoon mail, along with a short note.

"Dear Ted: Enclosed find check for 'Desperate Gamble.' It was just the thing I needed to fill a hole in the next issue. Dave."

But I'm a bread and butter writer, and instead of going out on a spree, I stared a blank sheet of paper in the face, trying to cook up an idea for another yarn. Results, as time passed, were nil.

Carla's voice reached me from the dining room, below. "Hey, Brains, soup's on!"

"Coming, pet!" I called back. Usually Carla has a hell of a time getting me down to meals, but right now supper was as welcome as a reprieve to a condemned man.

I turned out the light in my work room and started down the stairs. I was wearing carpet slippers, the comfortable kind that are loose and floppy —and that was my mistake.

Somehow I tripped on those slippers. Out of balance, I plunged headlong down the stairs. I remember vividly my sensations of falling—then everything went blackout.

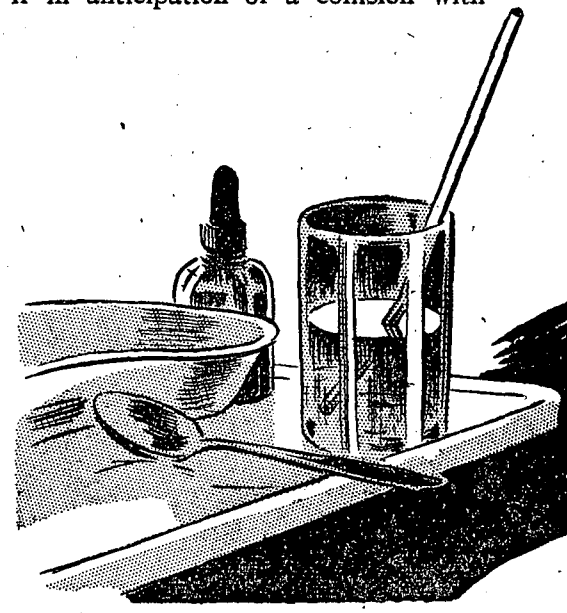
The next thing I knew, I was enveloped in a grey fog which writhed and swirled around me. I had no memory of regaining consciousness. It was as though I had not lost consciousness at all. The blackness just paled, became grey, and there I was.

The ground beneath my feet seemed substantial enough. I took a few hesitant steps, groping my way forward with outstretched arms.

"Carla!" I yelled. "Carla!"

My voice sounded oddly muffled. There was no answer.

I paused, undecided as whether to be frightened or not. Then I started walking. At first my shins quivered as if in anticipation of a collision with



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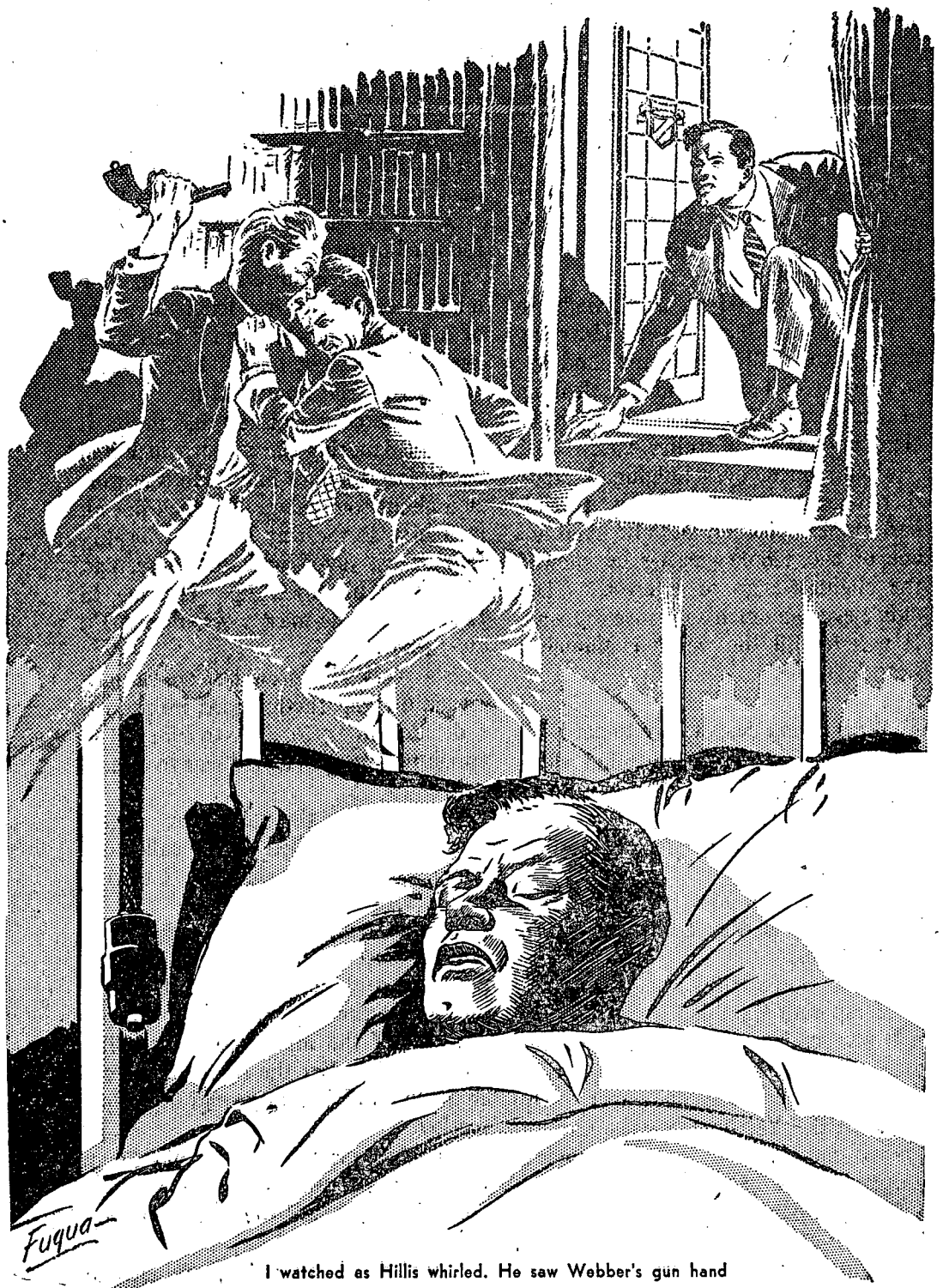

I watched as Hillis whirled. He saw Webber's gun hand raise, and acted instinctively, his fist thudding solidly into Webber's jaw

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furniture, but as nothing happened, I soon got over it.

I don't know how long I walked. The grey mist was everywhere, twisting and coiling. And then, suddenly, it began to thin. At the same time a confused murmur of sound reached my ears.

I stopped short, staring about me. It grew lighter, ever lighter. Outlines were becoming visible. The sounds increased in variety and volume.

Finally—I stood on a sidewalk, in the middle of a busy street. Hurrying throngs were all around me, and the screeching of brakes and the shrilling of whistles mingled chaotically with the clank and clatter of trolley cars.

Mouth open, eyes bulging, I stood there—floppy carpet slippers, threadbare smoking jacket, and all. And not one of the people passing by showed the slightest sign of interest. They didn't even so much as glance my way. It was for all the world as though I were invisible.

I WAS trying desperately to get it all straightened out in my mind when he came along. I couldn't have missed him. With his height and spread of shoulders, he'd have stood out anywhere.

I'd never seen him before. But I knew him as well as I knew the palm of my hand.

He was Steve Hillis, the protagonist of "Desperate Gamble."

It was screwy. It was something out of a nightmare. Steve Hillis was a name, a description on paper. He wasn't real. Yet here he was, coming toward me, lines of worry grooving deeply into his handsome face.

He went past me without the slightest flicker of an eyelash. Without knowing quite what I was doing, I fell into step behind him. I felt silly, awed, and excited all at once. Imagine following a character out of a story!

Then my first flush of surprise passed. Logic brought me back down to earth. Of course, this man couldn't be the fictional Steve Hillis. By a quirk of coincidence, he merely resembled Steve Hillis. I'd allowed the remarkable resemblance to carry me away.

The man turned into a taproom. I followed in after him. It wasn't everyday that I encountered a man who might have come alive from the pages of one of my stories, and I wanted to keep him in sight until I had satiated myself with the wonder of it.

He ordered a whiskey and drank it straight, ignoring the chaser which had been placed before him. He was worried about something. It stuck out all over him, in the way he gazed bleakly into space, toyed with his glass, and nibbled at his lower lip. He was, in fact, one of the most worried men I'd ever seen.

His deeply troubled appearance struck a sympathetic chord within me. I decided to try to talk to him. The surest way to get started was to offer a drink.

I gestured to the bartender. I gestured again. I called out. I called out again. I rapped on the bar. I started to get sore.

The bartender was standing there, almost directly before me. He was polishing a glass, glancing with covert interest at the very obviously worried features of the man who looked like Steve Hillis. Yet the bartender never so much as flicked an eyelid in my direction.

For that matter, neither did Steve Hillis' real-life twin. I might have been non-existent for all the attention they paid me.

I cooled off but quick. When two men don't notice you in spite of all your efforts to make yourself noticed, then

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things are very wrong indeed.

It worried me badly. What was wrong? Why weren't others aware of me?

I pinched myself. It hurt. I stamped on the floor. My foot stung. I was real enough. But others just didn't seem to know I was there.

AN AWFUL thought struck me. That fall down the stairs—was I dead? Was I here in spirit form, real to myself, but not real to others?

I didn't have time to debate the question. Steve Hillis' double swung abruptly out of the taproom. I followed quickly after him.

He started down the street with long, loose strides which made it difficult for me to keep up. Then, without warning, the grey fog in which I had found myself earlier, was back. It thinned and vanished after a moment. The man I followed stood before the ornate front of a night club. The neon sign over the door read: "The Golden Circle."

I goggled at that sign, clutching frantically at what few shreds of sanity were left to me. "The Golden Circle" was exactly the name of a night club I had used in my story, "Desperate Gamble." I had thought the name distinctive and unusual. To the best of my knowledge, it had never been used before.

And suddenly I was remembering things. I had started "Desperate Gamble" with Steve Hillis walking down the street, his face worried and desperate. I'd had him stop at a taproom, drink a whiskey and ignore the chaser. After a transition, I'd had him appear before the Golden Circle night club.

And it all had happened that way!

Steve Hillis had gone into that night club. The man who looked like him did just that.

My thoughts racing wildly, I followed. The interior of the Golden Circle was beautiful in severely modernistic way. Steve Hillis' twin strode up to the bar.

"I have an appointment with Bardon," he told the bartender.

Bardon! Nick Bardon. Another character in "Desperate Gamble!"

The bartender pressed a button beneath the bar, then nodded. "Okay, go on up."

Steve Hillis' double ascended a flight of stairs to the left of the bar, with me right behind him. At the top of the stairs, he knocked at a door.

"Come in," a voice responded abruptly.

Nick Bardon was seated behind a great wheat-blonde desk, looking just as sauve and sleek and darkly dangerous as I had described him in "Desperate Gamble." Lolling in an armchair near the door was a thick-set, ape-like individual, with the puffy, scarred features of an ex-boxer. I recognized him, too. He was Pug Webber, Nick Bardon's strong-arm man.

"You took your time getting here, Hillis," Bardon said.

I wasn't very much surprised to learn that the man who looked like Steve Hillis really was Steve Hillis after all. Seeing Bardon and Webber, I'd already guessed that would be the case.

I was quivering with excitement. I was seeing my story in real-life, taking place before my very eyes. I knew just what was going to be said and done, but the novelty of it was nonetheless breathtaking.

Bardon reached into a drawer and pulled out a sheaf of notes. He spread them out fan-wise on the desk top, and gazed quizzically at Steve Hillis. "These are your IOU's, Hillis. They total almost seven-thousand dollars. What I want to know is, just when are you going to pay them?"

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THE Golden Circle was front for a magnificent gambling establishment on an upper floor. Steve Hillis had plunged recklessly and got badly into debt with Bardon.

Hillis took a deep breath. "I'm broke," he told Bardon. "Flat broke."

"What!" Bardon sat up straight in his chair, an unpleasant look of astonishment distorting his sharp, dark face. "Are you trying to kid me, Hillis? Your family is wealthy. How can you possibly be broke?"

Hillis shrugged, his youthful features bitter. "The war wiped out our importing business, which was the main source of our income. We've been struggling along ever since. I guess we were too proud to make our poverty public."

"Then what's the idea of making out these IOU's?" Bardon demanded, frowning blackly.

"I'd lost what little I had," Hillis answered. "I needed money badly. I risked everything on a turn of luck, but"—he shrugged again—"it didn't work out."

Hillis hesitated, then went on to explain more fully. In love with rich and beautiful Irene Sprague, he was too poor to marry her. The girl's father, Nathan Sprague, had offered Hillis an important position in his steel business—provided, however, that Hillis bought up a large share of stock. The position would have meant security, advancement, and eventually Hillis' complete taking over of the wealthy and thriving Sprague steel concern. And it would, at the same time, have made possible Hillis' marriage to Irene.

The obstacle was the necessity of Hillis buying his way in. He didn't have the money. In an effort to obtain it, he had scraped together such funds as he could and staked them all in a desperate gamble at the Golden Circle. But he'd succeeded only in getting himself badly in debt with Bardon.

There was no slightest sign of sympathy on Bardon's face when Hillis finished. "That doesn't cut any ice with me, Hillis," Bardon stated coldly. "You owe me money, and I want it. I'm going to give you one week to pay up. I don't care how you get the money, but you'd better get it. With what I know now, I can make it plenty hot for you with Nathan Sprague. He wouldn't want a partner in his business who gambles."

Anger flared in Hillis' eyes, but he compressed his lips tightly and turned to leave. I gave Bardon a dirty look, which, however, was wasted as he couldn't see me. I'd intended to make him a hateful personality, and I'd succeeded so well that even *I* disliked him.

Outside, Hillis walked slowly, his face more worried, if possible, than before. I did not continue following him. I looked around for someone else—and I saw her, just as I'd known I would.

Irene Sprague was peering cautiously from a doorway on the opposite side of the street. Everything was happening just as I had plotted it. I knew that the girl, realizing Hillis was deeply concerned over something, had taken to following him in an effort to learn what it was. Hillis' pride had kept him from telling her of his trouble. Now, having seen Hillis visit the Golden Circle, she knew his anxiety was over some matter connected with Nick Bardon.

IRENE didn't go after Hillis. She waited until he was a good distance away, then she crossed the street and entered the Golden Circle. I was right behind her. I wanted to be present at the next phase of this real-life working out of "Desperate Gamble."

Bardon was effusively delighted to see Irene. He had no intimation as yet that her visit was over Steve Hillis.

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Bardon looked at Pug Webber and jerked his head at the door. "You can run than errand for me now, Pug," he said.

"Sure, boss, I get you." Webber left the room with a knowing leer.

Bardon bustled about energetically. With many gallant flourishes, he pulled up a chair for Irene, offered her cigarettes, and mixed drinks from a cellarette built into his desk.

Bardon was infatuated with Irene Sprague. He'd met her a short time before at an auction which she had attended with her father, Nathan Sprague. Among the articles auctioned off had been a painting by Rembrandt. Bardon's passion was collecting, and he'd wanted this particular painting badly. But Nathan Sprague had outbid him. Bardon had been furious, but because of his interest in Irene, he'd managed successfully to conceal it.

Irene got down to business as soon as Bardon had seated himself. "Steve Hillis was here a moment ago," she began. "He's very badly worried about something. He won't tell me what it is, but I want to find out so that I can help him if possible. Do you have any idea of what is wrong?"

The smile left Bardon's face, leaving it sullen. He'd been hoping Irene's visit was a friendly one, and disappointment had come hard.

Bardon nodded slowly. "I do know what's wrong. Hillis has been doing some heavy gambling here at my place, and got himself into debt." Bardon leaned forward abruptly. "Miss Sprague, forget abbout Steve Hillis. He's no good. He's just a dumb playboy, throwing his money away as fast as he gets it. You'd never get anywhere with a guy like that. But take me—I've got brains and a bank account not even your father could sniff at. I could give you everything you could possibly want. Why—"

"Please, Mr. Bardon." Irene held up a slim hand. "You said Steve owes you money. Would you mind telling me how much? I'll be glad to pay whatever he owes, provided you don't tell him who did so."

Bardon flinched as though struck. His dark face flushed with anger and chagrin. But he managed quickly to get himself back under control. His eyes became crafty. "I don't think you'd be able to pay me, Miss Sprague."

"Why not?" Irene asked. "How much does Steve owe?"

"Almost twenty-thousand dollars," Bardon lied smoothly.

"Twenty-thousand!" Irene's hand went to her cheek in a gesture of dismay.

"Exactly," Bardon affirmed. "Only a fool would get himself as badly into debt as that. Miss Sprague, forget this guy, Hillis. Look, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'm crazy about you. I want to marry you. If you throw Hillis over, I'll cancel his debt completely."

Irene shook her auburn head firmly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bardon, I couldn't consider it. I love Steve."

"Then are you willing to pay what he owes me?" Bardon snapped.

Irene bit her lip. Her glance faltered. "It's more than I could raise, even if I sold everything I have. My father wouldn't help me. He would, in fact, forbid me to have anything further to do with Steve if he knew about this gambling debt."

BARDON sat back in his chair, his dark face cold and hard. Abruptly, his lips twisted in a grim smile. He leaned forward, spoke softly.

"Miss Sprague, there's something I'd like to have second only to yourself. It's the Rembrandt painting for which your father outbid me at the auction.

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If I can't have you, then I want this painting."

I stared in sudden bewilderment. Something was wrong. This wasn't according to the plot of my story!

"But father would never part with the painting," Irene protested. "There is no way I could make him do so."

"We won't ask him to part with it," Bardon responded sauvely. "We'll take it whether he likes it or not."

Something almost like fear gripped me. My plot was working out along new and radical lines. For the first time since this bizarre coming-to-life of "Desperate Gamble," I didn't know what was going to happen until it actually happened! And not knowing what the end was going to be like, I felt a sudden anxiety for Steve and Irene.

But what had gone wrong? How had this come about?

In another moment I had the answer. The painting!

There is a rule in writing to the effect that nothing must enter into a story that has no bearing upon the story itself. I'd unconsciously violated this rule by using the painting as an explanation for Bardon's acquaintance and infatuation with Irene. The painting had not otherwise been an integral part of the story. But Bardon, in this real-life enactment, had made it so.

In my plotting out of the story, I'd missed the possibilities of the painting entirely. But Bardon had not, and he could not, because I'd stated his passion was collecting, and the painting had been one of his prime desires. Thus the story had diverged along new and different lines. And I didn't know what was going to happen next!

Irene's eyes were wide. "Take my father's painting? But that's absurd!"

"Not at all," Bardon assured silkily. "You want to see Hillis out of debt, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then this is the only way you can help him. Miss Sprague, I want that painting. If you make it possible for me to get it, I'll cancel Hillis' debt. If you refuse to help me, then I shall see to it at once that your father learns of Hillis' gambling. I don't need to tell you what the results of this will be."

"But what could I possibly do?" the girl cried hopelessly.

"You can make it possible for the painting to be stolen," Bardon explained. "You can provide me with a plan of the house, the location of the painting. And you can see to it that burglar alarms and such are shut off, and that certain windows will be conveniently open."

"But I couldn't do that!" Irene protested in dismay.

"Either you do it, or I shall get in touch with your father at once!" Bardon declared flatly.

Irene's hands twisted together nervously, an agony of indecision showing on her face. Finally her auburn head moved in a reluctant nod.

Glowing with triumph, Bardon produced pencil and paper. He had Irene draw a plan of the Sprague house. Then he coached the girl on the part she was to play. There was a weary resignation about her, an utter lack of hope, that made my blood boil. Loathing showed in her glance whenever she looked at Bardon.

IRENE left as soon as the hateful proceedings were finished. I remained behind to see what Bardon would do next.

Shortly after Irene had gone, Pug Webber returned to the office. Bardon acquainted Webber with what had taken place during his absence.

"Now listen, Pug, this is what I'm going to do," Bardon said, with a gloat-

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ing smile. "I'm going to have Hillis do the dirty work. I'll explain it's his only chance to square himself with me, and that if he doesn't play ball, I'll queer him with Nathan Sprague, but definitely. I won't tell Hillis Irene Sprague is in on it, because otherwise he'll refuse.

"The job takes place tonight. I don't want to give Hillis and the girl any time to cook up a way out. Hillis is to go into the house and get the painting. When he returns to the car, I'll tell him the painting is the wrong one and send him back. You'll go with him this time. In the house, you'll hit him over the head with your gun, knock over some furniture to make noise, and leave. It'll look like Hillis and someone else broke into the house and took the painting. In making a getaway, Hillis fell over something and knocked himself out. The girl will be afraid to say anything because of the part she played. Hillis will have to keep his mouth shut to protect her. And with Hillis in jail and out of the way"—Bardon rubbed his hands together exultingly—"Irene Sprague will have to be nice to me, because if she isn't, I can make a lot of trouble for her."

I was rigid with horror. Events were shaping up into tragedy for Irene and Steve. And there was nothing I could do! Unable to make myself seen or heard, there was no way I could warn them.

I had an overwhelming sense of guilt. It was entirely my fault that events had got so dangerously out of hand. If I hadn't overlooked the possibilities of the painting, everything would have happened the way I'd originally plotted it out.

Anxiety drove me almost frantic. I had to do something to avert the disaster which threatened Steve and Irene. But what? What could I possibly do?

Then an idea struck me. The story! This was all a result of the story I'd written. If I could only have a certain vital change made in "Desperate Gamble"—

The answer was astonishingly simple. All I had to do was call up Dave Naylor down at Eclipse Publications and have him remove from "Desperate Gamble" the paragraph dealing with the painting. Then everything would work out as I had plotted it.

But how to get where I could make a telephone call? Evidently the desire alone was sufficient, for abruptly I was back in that grey fog, and tendrils and streamers of it were writhing and twisting around me. When the fog faded away, I found myself in what seemed like a hotel lobby, standing directly before a line of telephone booths.

I lost no time in getting connected with Dave Naylor.

"Look, Dave," I began, "there's a paragraph I want you to remove from 'Desperate Gamble.' It's important."

"How do you mean?" Naylor asked, his voice puzzled.

"It's deadwood," I explained lamely. "Slows up the action. The readers might raise a kick."

Naylor laughed. "Why worry about that? You got paid for the yarn, didn't you?"

"Sure, Dave, but I'm a craftsman. I can't be satisfied until everything in a story is perfect."

"Well, you'll have to let it go this time," Naylor told me. "I've already sent your yarn to the printer—it's probably set in type by now."

ALL the hope went out of me like air from a pricked balloon, leaving me limp with despair. I hung up leadenly. I had failed in the only thing which would have helped Irene and Steve.

Suddenly I was angry—furious with

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Bardon and his evil cunning. In my rage I determined by sheer force of will alone to somehow spoil his plan.

I'd got the knack of those transitions through the grey fog. All you had to do, it seemed, was to wish or will yourself wherever you wanted to go.

I decided to will myself to the Sprague home at the time Hillis was due to return with the painting to the car where Bardon and Webber were waiting.

The grey fog surrounded me again, vanished. It was night. I stood on a sidewalk, near a parked car. Vaguely, I made out two men seated within it. Bardon and Webber!

There was a rustling of foliage behind me. I turned as a man emerged from a gap in the bushes which lined the sidewalk. It was Steve Hillis, his face pale and strained. He was carrying a roll of canvas under one arm. The painting!

Bardon leaned his head out of the window of the car. "You got it?" he asked tensely.

Hillis nodded without speaking. He handed Bardon the roll of canvas.

Bardon turned on the dashlight and scrutinized the painting. He looked at Hillis with a frown. "What's this? Hillis, this isn't the right painting! You clumsy fool, why didn't you be careful?"

Hillis stiffened with anger. "This is the painting you described to me. And I found it just where you said I was supposed to find it. If there's any mistake, it's yours and not mine."

"You'll have to go back to get the right one," Bardon said. "Pug, you go with him this time to make sure nothing goes wrong."

"Right, boss," Pug said. He climbed out of the car.

Hillis hesitated a long moment, his jaw muscles bunched hard. Then a dull resignation took the defiant set out of his wide shoulders. He turned back toward the Sprague house. With a meaningful wink at Bardon, Webber followed.

I was right behind the two as they entered the bushes and strode cautiously over the lawn toward the house squatting like some threatening monster in the darkness. The trap was closing inexorably about Hillis—and I had to warn him.

Catching up with Hillis, I grasped his arm and shook it insistently. "Stop!" I pleaded. "Don't go any further. Bardon's got the right painting. He's going to trick you!"

Hillis never noticed me. He kept right on walking.

I got a grip on the tail of his coat and dug my heels into the turf in a wild effort to stop him. "Steve—don't be a fool! You're walking right into a trap!"

Hillis never faltered in his steady progress toward the house. I was air. I was less than air. I was nothingness itself.

I didn't give up. Plodding doggedly beside Hillis, I literally screamed a steady flow of thought at him.

Steve, stop! Steve, stop! Don't go any further. Don't go any further. It's a trap. A trap, Steve!

Over and over. Over and over.

Hillis never wavered. He never so much as twitched a muscle in my direction.

I groaned in an agony of despair. I had failed—failed again. There was nothing left for me to do now but watch Bardon's scheme reach its vicious conclusion.

Hillis and Webber reached a group of French windows which opened out on the lawn. One of the windows was ajar. Stealthily, the two crept through it. They were in the library.

Webber reached into his pocket for

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the gun. He pulled it out, raised it high.

Frozen with dread, I watched. The tableau held a moment, as though time had paused.

And then—Hillis whirled. He saw the gun in Webber's upraised hand. He acted automatically. Twisting from the path of the intended blow, his fist thudded like a bolt of lightning into Webber's jaw.

MY BREATH left me in an explosive gasp of amazement. It was so totally unexpected, so unhoped for, as to be incredible.

Hillis caught Webber as he fell. lowered him quietly to the floor. Then Hillis straightened sharply as a figure materialized from the shadows of the room.

"Why, Steve, what are you doing here?" a voice cried softly.

It was Irene, fully dressed. There was nothing for Hillis to do but explain everything. Irene divulged her own part in the affair. Unable to sleep because of worry, she had left her room to see if the theft had gone through as planned. Entering the library, she had discovered Hillis.

"Steve—what are you going to do?" the girl asked anxiously.

Hillis lifted his shoulders in a forlorn shrug. "I got the wrong painting the first time. I'll have to get the right one and return to Bardon."

"But he does have the right painting!" Irene insisted. "I looked, Steve, and it's gone."

Hillis stared at the girl in sudden realization. "Then that was why Webber tried to hit me with the gun. Bardon intended to double-cross me!" Hillis straightened with grim purpose. "All right, two can play at that game. Irene, you'll find Bardon in a parked car at the south side of the house. Tell him that something went wrong, and that he is to come here with the painting. You can tell him that you discovered the painting to be a fake. I'm going to have a little surprise waiting for him."

Irene nodded quickly and slipped out through the French windows. Hillis watched until she was lost in the gloom, then concealed himself behind a chair.

Although relieved that events seemed at last to be working out in favor of Irene and Steve, I felt a nagging apprehension. Suppose Bardon was suspicious? What if he refused to accompany the girl to the house?

Shortly, I heard the soft sibilance of approaching footsteps. Bardon and Irene were coming swiftly over the lawn toward the opened French window. Bardon had taken Irene's bait!

Then the totally unexpected happened again. Webber roused from the stupor into which Hillis' blow had sent him. He saw Bardon and Irene. He didn't recognize them in the darkness. All he saw was danger bearing down upon him. Immediate panic filled his moronic mind.

Webber had managed to retain his gun. Now, in one quick movement, he raised it. Shots thundered into the silence.

Bardon dropped the rolled painting. He clutched at his chest, swayed, and fell. Before Webber could swing the point of his gun to Irene, Hillis darted from behind the chair and leaped upon him. They struggled furiously in the darkness.

Hillis managed to get a grip on Webber's gun hand. He brought up his knee in a pile-drived jab to Webber's stomach. Webber's fingers momentarily relaxed about the gun. Hillis tore the weapon free, clubbed it at Webber's head. The ex-boxer went limp once more in unconsciousness.

Hillis rose unsteadily to his feet.

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Irene ran to him, and they held each other tightly.

I NEEDED someone to hold onto myself, but I had to be satisfied with a chair. Things had happened so fast that I was giddy.

The room was suddenly lighted. An elderly, grey-haired man in a robe stood in the doorway. He held a large revolver.

"What's this? What's going on?" he demanded. It was Nathan Sprague. He stared from Hillis and Irene to the prone forms of Bardon and Webber.

Irene looked helplessly at Hillis. He seized the initiative, began to speak swiftly.

"Irene slipped out to meet me. We went for a walk. Returning to the house, we found these two men trying to get away with your Rembrandt painting. I attacked them. In the struggle, this one"—Hillis indicated Bardon—"accidently got shot by the other."

"Why, it's Nick Bardon!" Nathan Sprague exclaimed. "I knew he wanted the painting, but I never thought he stoop to thievery." Sprague looked at Hillis with suddenly kindling eyes. "I'm afraid I underestimated you, Steve. I wanted you to buy into my business only to test your sincerity. Now, however, you may consider yourself my partner—and with no strings attached. I need a resourceful young man like you. And so, it seems, does Irene."

Sprague grinned. "Well, excuse me while I call the police."

It was just the opportunity Irene and Hillis needed. . . .

The grey fog was suddenly around me again. This time it thickened, grew darker. Then there was blackness and nothingness.

I awoke in the hospital, where the doctors told me I'd had a concussion of the brain. But I was assured that there was no further danger.

A week later I returned home. I'd become convinced that what had seemed like a distorted real-life enactment of "Desperate Gamble" was only a remarkably vivid dream. Just a dream. I dismissed it from my mind.

So you can imagine my intense surprise when, upon publication of "Desperate Gamble," I found that Dave Naylor had edited and revised the story exactly as it had taken place in what had seemed merely a dream.

Dave didn't understand—and he still doesn't understand—what I meant when I called him up and said, "Dave, I want to thank you for the swell job of editing you did on 'Desperate Gamble.' You'll never know how much it meant."

THE TALE OF A BIRD

By GARY LEE HORTON

AMONG the stories that are told of the Pacific Islands, there is one that awakens sympathy in the hearts of all who happen to hear it. The tale has been told so many times among the natives that some have challenged its authenticity, and yet the details of the episode have lived for centuries. It is thought of in the same way as the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table; it holds the unusual position of being part legend and part truth.

In the East, sea eagles are large and powerful and have been thought to possess long memories. Many years ago, it is said, a young man living near Jala Jala once stole a nest of the eagle's young and carried it to his hut. Months passed and nothing happened. A whole year went by before any sign of the elder eagles was seen. When the birds did make their appearance, their purpose was unmistakably one of revenge, no matter how unwilling a person may be to grant an animal

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the possession of human motives.

The birds, as if by a pre-conceived plan, appeared above his home. Swooping down on his wife, they clawed her face and beat her with their wings. She was so weak she was unable to call out for help or strike back when they picked up her infant child with their death-dealing claws and carried it away. When the father became aware of what had happened, he was enraged. Later realizing how helpless he was he tried to make the best of it.

With untiring effort he nursed his wife back to health, and soon they were able to forget their misfortune with the presence of the second child born to them. It seemed hardly plausible that the event could recur and yet, after a year had passed the birds again returned to kidnap the second child. Before the eyes of the helpless parents the three month old infant was carried aloft.

This time the father could not grieve passively. Something had to be done. He set out in the direction the birds had taken in an effort to find their nest and, perhaps, his child. Doggedly he pursued them until finally high on a cliff that no man had ever scaled before, he discovered their nest. The sight which met his eyes within was almost more than he could bear. In the nest were the skeletons of his children picked clean of any signs of former life by the sharp beaks of the revengeful birds. In order to glimpse this ghastly sight, the father had to hang over the edge of the rock with only his fingertips to save him from personal disaster. While hanging there, the father bird came swooping from the sky and began to strike at him with claws and wings. In the face of such an assault it was impossible for the man to climb back to safety. He knew death was in store for him. His one hope was to kill his enemy, too.

As the bird dived at him, he released his hold on the rock and grabbed the eagle about the neck. The two bodies plunged down to death together. Thus revenge and counter-revenge was meted out against the sultry beauty of a tropical landscape in the land of Jala Jala.

LITTLE GIANT

By CHARLES REEVES

MEASURING exactly 18 inches high in his silk stockings, the hero of this story was a courtier, diplomat, soldier, and lover. He carried out secret missions for his Queen, terrorized husbands, fought pirates and Puritans, and killed his adversary in a duel.

Sir Jeffery Hudson, knighted by Charles I, England's Cavalier king, reached his full height of 18 inches at the age of 7. The son of a bull-baiter to the Duke of Buckingham, Jeffery was a perfect pocket-sized edition of a man. At the age of 9, he caught the eye of the Duchess, who dressed him in satin, gave him two tall men to wait on him, and took him into her service. When Their Majesties Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria came along to Buckingham on a royal visit, the Duchess had Jeffery baked into a mock pie, which was set before the Queen. The crust was cut and little Jeffery stepped out with a sweeping bow.

Delighted, the Queen whisked Jeffery off with her and installed him as a royal favorite. At the incredibly young age of 11, Jeffery was enlisted into the British diplomatic service. The Queen was expecting an heir, and her mother, the French Regent Marie de'Medici, had promised a midwife for the occasion. Jeffery was sent off to France to get her, and returned loaded down with rich gifts from all the ladies of the French court, whom he had captivated by his gallantry and charm.

Next, Jeffery enlisted in the Dutch army which was engaged in a war for independence against the Spaniards. All during the campaign, glowing reports came from the Dutch camp of the deeds of "Strenuous Jeffery." He returned from the wars a year later, covered with glory, and was knighted by the king.

When Cromwell's Puritans started the Civil War, Sir Jeffery was appointed a Captain of Horse in the King's army. Even this mighty midget was unable to stem the rising Puritan tide. The Cavaliers were defeated and Sir Jeffery fled to France. Near Paris he got into a quarrel with a younger brother of one of the Queen's lifeguards. The dispute was over a mademoiselle who had captured his heart. A duel was arranged. His adversary showed up the next morning with a squirt-gun, and Sir Jeffery was so enraged that he shot him dead on the spot. For this rash action, he was promptly thrown into prison, and the Queen had to use all her influence to get him out.

He left France in disgrace at the age of 25, and wandered about the face of the globe, until finally he was taken by the Turks to the Barbary States and sold in slavery to the Moors until he was ransomed.

Sir Jeffery returned to England at 39, in one respect at least a remarkably changed man, for during his period of enslavement he had more than doubled his height, and now stood 3 feet, 6 inches in his boots and spurs.

The amazing feats of this little giant would be hard to believe if we did not have the evidence of the historians of the time. Moreover, Sir Jeffery sat for his portrait repeatedly—twice, with the Queen, for portraits painted by the great Flemish master, Van Dyck. These portraits still hang in Hampton Court, a living tribute to the mightiest midget of them all.

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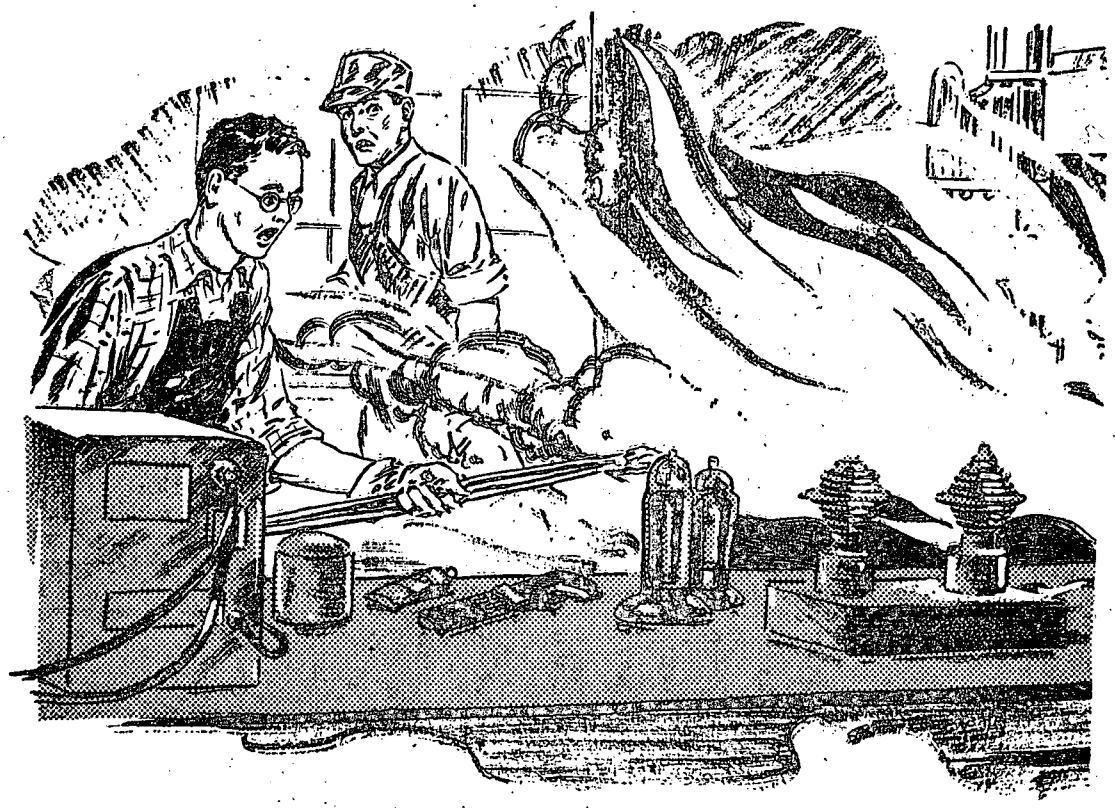

Hickson's Strange Adventure

by E. K. Jarvis

Alien forces lay hidden in Bill Queen's mind, and Hickson discovered that his own life was a part of them

JAMES MAXWELL HICKSON, poking into the darkness that hides the secrets of the universe, won the Nobel prize. What he actually did was develop a system of mathematics that would reveal not only the position of an electron but the speed and the direction in which it was traveling, something the scientific wiseacres said couldn't be done. Hickson did it, and got three things out of it: a respectable chunk of money, a hell of a lot of publicity, and two visitors.

The visitors came in the night and they didn't bother to ring the doorbell of the little bachelor apartment that the scientist occupied just off the University. Using methods of their own, they picked the lock of his door. The first thing Hickson knew about them, they were in his bedroom. He sat up in a flurry of blankets and flying bedclothes.

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The *hisss* was the hiss of a snake magnified a thousand times, and Rocky screamed desperately . . .

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"What the hell's going on here?"

"Take it easy, Doc. You name Hickson?"

"Yes. What's it to you?"

There were two of the men. They kept their hats pulled down low over their eyes and they kept their hands in their topcoat pockets. Hickson looked them over. They looked like thugs to him.

"What the hell do you two muggs want?"

Unlike many of his high-toned colleagues, who never used a simple word when a jawbreaker would do the job half as well, Hickson spoke the language of the people. He said what he intended to say and he always got right down to the point. His directness startled his two callers.

"Now take it easy, Doc—," Gray Topcoat said.

"I am taking it easy," Hickson snapped. "Or I was, until you thugs came busting in."

Brown Topcoat, who had kept to the rear, tried to push forward.

"Let me learn him some manners, Rocky," he pled.

Rocky, he of the gray coat, shoved the brown man back. "I'll handle this, Buzz," he said. He spoke again to the scientist. "I said to take it easy and I meant take it easy. If you act right, you won't get hurt. Now I'll tell you what we want. We want you to go look at an invention."

"You want what?"

IN SPITE of himself, the scientist was startled. His first thought was that this was a holdup, a robbery. His two callers looked like burglars. But instead of breaking in to rob him of his ready cash and any little knick-knacks they might find handy, they wanted him to go look at an invention. The idea was so preposterous it was intriguing.

"Yeah," the gray-clad Rocky answered. "We got an invention that we'd like you to take a look at."

"Well I'm damned," Hickson said. He was thinking fast, trying to grasp all of the implications of this situation. The more he thought the more he realized there was more here than had been told, a damned sight more. Why had they broken in to talk to him? If they had taken the trouble to make any inquiries about him they would have discovered that he had a reputation for being willing to look at anything at any time, no matter what. And what kind of an invention did they have that they wanted *him* to look at it?

"So if you'll get into your clothes," Rocky said, "and come along with us, everything will be lovely, just lovely."

"Um. And supposing I tell you to go chase yourself?"

"In that case," Rocky said, "you won't need any fortune teller and no crystal ball to tell you that you've got a load of trouble in your future."

"So that's it," Hickson said. He slid his feet out of bed and fumbled for his socks. "Gentlemen, I'm at your service. But I would like to know how in the devil you happened to pick me to go out at one o'clock in the morning to look at your blasted invention."

"That's easy," Rocky answered. "We read in the papers about you winning this prize and we figured you must be a big-shot scientist. And that's what we want to look at what we've got, a big-shot, the biggest there is. Because what we've got is big."

"The biggest thing that ever happened," the man in the brown topcoat echoed. "Worth a billion bucks if we handle it right." He smacked his lips. "Boy, what I can't do with my share of that dough!"

Somehow the words thrilled Hickson. These two men might not know what

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they were talking about, but they certainly believed they had something big. Of course they might be a couple of crackpots but a lot of people had once thought Tom Edison was a crackpot. You never could tell when one of these Crazy Joes was going to turn up with the idea that set the world on fire.

"Gentlemen, I'm ready," he announced.

They stood aside to let him go first and each kept his right hand in his topcoat pocket as the scientist walked by. Not until then did he realize they had guns in their pockets and that these guns were covering him.

He got his second shock outside. They courteously invited him into the back seat of a Cadillac parked at the curb. Rocky climbed in beside him, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket.

"If you don't mind, Doc," Rocky said. "We're not too anxious for you to know where you've been. So I'll just ask you to hold still while I tie this blinder on you. And then I'll ask you to lie down on the floorboards, if you don't mind."

HICKSON minded bitterly. But he also minded the gun he now knew Rocky had in his pocket. He submitted to the indignity of the blindfold and to lying down on the floorboards. Buzz, who had climbed in behind the wheel, mashed the starter and the car roared away from the curb.

He got his third shock when he saw the invention they had taken him to see. They stopped the car in what turned out to be the back end of an abandoned garage located in no telling what section of the city, took off his blindfold and walked him into a backroom, turned on the lights. Heavy boards had been laid across two wooden supports, forming a workbench in the middle of the room. The invention was sitting on the bench.

"There it is, Doc," Rocky invited. "Look it over."

Hickson's first dazed impression was that somebody had given an idiot four or five old radio sets, a motor, a storage battery, a lot of copper ribbon and copper tubing, and turned him loose. The only thing that made sense so far as he could see was the motor. It was a piece of heavy equipment, designed for industrial use. It was bolted firmly to the workbench and was fitted with a clutch and brake arrangement. A handlettered meter on the brake gave a crude but direct reading in horsepower. The last device was simple but ingenious. It revealed at a glance how much horsepower the motor was delivering at any time.

Hickson bent over to examine the conglomeration of equipment. Rocky was breathing in his ear. "What do you make of it?" Rocky whispered huskily.

"I don't make anything of it," the scientist answered testily. "I don't know what it is, I don't know what it's supposed to do, I don't know how it works, or anything else."

"I'll show you how it works," the thug answered. He reached over and pushed a switch.

A reedy vibration on a power pack that looked like it had been lifted bodily from an automobile radio began to whine. It was fed by the storage battery and was evidently furnishing high tension current for the plates of the radio tubes. The tubes glowed cherry red. A circular arrangement of coils that looked for all the world like the magneto out of a Model T Ford slowly started spinning, picked up speed. Commutator rings were mounted under the coil and were designed to pick up current from it. Heavy copper cables ran from the rings to a double pole knife switch. The switch was open. Cables

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from it ran directly to the big motor that was fitted with the horsepower meter and the brake.

Current flowing from the crazy arrangement of spinning coils and radio tubes was fed directly into the testing motor. Hickson saw this much at a glance. He shook his head.

"I don't see—" he began.

"Watch," Rocky interrupted.

He closed the switch in the cables that fed current to the motor.

Screeeech! Zooooom!

THE motor howled, hummed with power as the current hit it.

Hickson felt the hair rise along the back of his head. Electric splashes raced up his spine.

"I'm nuts!" he said firmly. "I'm batty, or I'm hallucinating." Grimly. "Or somebody is playing a trick on me."

A six-volt storage battery was turning a heavy industrial motor. Not only turning it but making it run at full speed. This was impossible. It just couldn't happen.

"Watch," Rocky said. His voice was husky with suppressed emotion, tense with excitement. On the other side of the workbench Buzz was grinning like some moon-faced ghoul. "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy," Buzz was whispering ecstatically.

Rocky slammed the clutch home. This clutch connected the testing motor with the brake.

Zoowie! the motor screamed in pain as the load hit it.

Rocky pressed down on the brake, silently pointed to the meter. The meter had jumped madly. It was pressing against the far side of the dial. Hickson squinted at the figures.

"That damned thing is registering better than a hundred horsepower!" he whispered.

"Ah," Rocky said.

"Hot ziggety dog!" Buzz said.

Hickson looked from one man to the other. Rocky was the leader; there was strength and cunning power on his face. He knew, or thought he knew, what this demonstration meant. Rocky sensed that Opportunity with a big O was knocking at his door. He didn't intend to let the big O get away. His intention was carved in the lines of his face. He was a man you would have to take into consideration. There was a grin on Buzz's moon face and he was licking his lips.

"Oh, boy!" he breathed.

The hand on the meter was still up against the hundred mark. It had gone as far as it could go. There wasn't any higher reading on the scale.

Hickson looked from the two men to the meter. His gaze went past the throbbing motor to the crazy conglomeration of equipment on the workbench, lingered for an instant on the storage battery, went over the radio tubes, over the spinning coils, came back to the storage battery. He walked slowly around the workbench, looking at everything but never quite taking that battery out of his mind. It was an ordinary six-volt storage battery, maybe a hundred, maybe a 120 amprere hour capacity. Under no circumstances was it capable of delivering the strength of a hundred horses.

The scientist got down on his knees, looked under the workbench. He kicked one of the supports. They were sitting on concrete and no concealed wiring ran through them. He got to his feet, looked at the ceiling and the walls. A single electric light with a 200 watt bulb in it hung from the ceiling. He glared at the light. The walls were bare. Current was not being delivered by induction, not across the space within the room. Current was not being

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delivered from any source that he could see, except that damned storage battery, and the battery was only supplying the juice to light the radio tubes and to turn the crazy coils wound on the Model T magneto.

"Where in the hell is the juice coming from?" Hickson said to himself.

The two men were watching him closely.

"What do you think?" Rocky questioned.

HICKSON took a deep breath. He thought over the words he was going to say. None of them seemed right. There weren't any words to express the spell-binding, stupefying amazement that flooded through him. He shook his finger at Rocky. "Either you boys have got this thing hooked up to some hidden power source—"

"It's not that," Rocky said, and you had to believe the sincerity in his voice. "I swear it!"

"On a stack of Bibles," Buzz added.

"—Or you've got a miracle!" Hickson finished.

It was exactly that. A miracle. More power—a damned sight more power—was being delivered from an electrical generator than was being put into it.

Buzz showed his elation. Rocky looked pleased but reserve still lingered on his face.

The scientist saw the reserve. "Which brings us back to me. I've looked at your invention. What do you want me to do now?"

Rocky was evidently prepared for this question. "We want two things of you, Doc," he said. "The first is—we want you to tell us why this thing works—"

"Uh?"

"We want to know what makes it go round and round."

"You don't know?"

Rocky shook his head. "That's not the question. We want you to put it into your words, scientific words, words that you big shots will understand."

He was evading the question and Hickson knew it. The scientist kept silent. He had a strong hunch that silence right here was more that golden.

"Ah," he said. "And the second thing?"

Before Rocky could speak there was a change in the laboring groan of the motor. The throb began to lessen, to fade out. The hum dropped a notch, kept on dropping. The meter on the dial moved rapidly to the left, went down the scale. Fluttering, the motor stopped turning entirely. It hummed but did not move.

The Model T dynamo, fed by the storage battery, kept turning. The radio tubes did not dim. But the big motor was dead.

"That's the second thing," Rocky said, a little sadly. "We want you to tell us why this damned thing quits every so often."

"Quits?"

"Yeah. It'll run for a while, and quit, and then it'll start running again. And there ain't no reason why it starts and there ain't no reason why it stops. And we want you to find out why it stops and we want you to cure it."

His voice had an either-or-else tone. It was a grim voice, a hard voice, a voice with the ring of steel in it.

"That's what we want you to do," Buzz backed up his boss. "And we don't want any back talk either."

"Holy Moses!" Hickson shouted. "You show me a miracle, about which I know nothing. When the miracle turns off, you tell me to turn it on again. What in the hell do you think I am—God?"

"We think you're a big shot," Rocky answered. "We think you know about

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such things. We think you can do the job. We *know* you damned well better be able to do it.

He drew his thumb across his throat, making a clicking sound with his tongue.

"Whew!" Hickson whistled. "And whew again!"

TWENTY-FOUR hours later the scientist knew several things. He knew he was dead tired. Buzz had gone out several times for coffee. Laced with strong slugs of whiskey, the coffee was keeping him going. He also knew he didn't know how this blasted generator worked.

Twice in this period of time it had begun to work, had delivered enough power to make the big motor smoke. It started without reason, stopped without reason. Hickson rather had the idea that the universe operated in an orderly fashion, that there was always a reason back of everything. He couldn't see the reason why this thing started or why it stopped. Maybe there wasn't any reason. No! That was lay madness. He had to believe in reason and order to stay sane.

When it was working, Hickson knew that Buzz was not far wrong in his estimate that it was worth a billion dollars. It was worth any amount of money you chose to think about. Just present this generator in working order and name your price. The scientist saw what this generator would do to the basic power industries of the world. Automobiles powered by it would not need gasoline, if bigger models could be constructed, locomotives, ships, the huge steam plants generating electricity, would not need coal or oil. It wouldn't be much good in planes. It would turn propellors all right but the jet engine was already marked as the future power plant in aviation. But everywhere electricity was used, this generator could be used, and electricity was used everywhere.

Yes, it was worth a billion bucks, if it could be made to work 100 per cent of the time.

When it worked, how did it work, how did it generate the power it so obviously produced? Here Hickson was baffled. The most efficient engine man had devised, you put so much energy into it, you got a little less out of it. Even a machine without friction—there wasn't any such thing but you could imagine one—would only give you back what you put into it. The laws of the universe, as men understood them, said you never got something for nothing.

You put the power of a six-volt storage battery into this generator and you got the energy of a hundred horses out of it. Energy could be transformed, energy could be changed, Einstein had said that energy and matter were different aspects of the same thing, but neither Einstein nor anybody else had said you could get more energy out of a generator than you put into it.

Hickson felt like tearing his hair every time he thought of what this generator was doing. No trick was involved. He had checked carefully. The damned thing actually delivered the goods.

Why did it stop working?

"Damn it, you'd think the thing had a mind of its own!" Hickson exploded. "It works a while, then it gets sulky and quits. It's cantankerous enough to be human."

Hickson knew he didn't know why it worked or why it didn't work. Rocky didn't like this, not a little bit. If Hickson had not been so preoccupied with the problem of the generator, he would have been worried about Rocky. Rocky wanted this thing to work.

Hickson also knew that Rocky and

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Buzz had not invented this generator. They didn't know the first thing about it. They hadn't wound these crazy coils of copper ribbon, they hadn't wired these radio tubes into the mad circuit, they hadn't hooked in the big motor and devised the testing scale. No, they hadn't invented the generator.

They had stolen it.

BUZZ had gone out after the man who had invented it. They were going to bring him here, so Hickson could talk to him. Hickson had insisted on talking to the man who had invented the generator.

"This wiring circuit is worse than a Chinese puzzle," Hickson had snapped. "I can't make heads or tails out of it. If you want me to tell you anything about it, you've got to let me talk to the man who put it together in the first place."

"Okay, Doc," Rocky had said. "We'll get him for you."

While they waited for Buzz to return with the inventor, Hickson sat on a stool and glared at the generator. Rocky tilted a chair back against the wall and smoked one cigarette after another.

"This thing is going to work, Doc," was all he said.

Buzz was not gone over five minutes. When he returned he was carrying a roped and gagged man. The inventor had been right in the building all the time, held prisoner. Buzz dumped him on the floor, pulled off the dirty gag, untied the ropes.

Dazed, frightened beyond words, almost too weak to move, a kid looked up from the floor. A kid! Dirty face, tousled sandy hair, ragged, patched pants, old tennis shoes, faded, out-of-shape sweater pulled on over a thin shirt, a frightened youngster looked up at the three men bending over him. He was barely out of his teens, maybe he wasn't out of them yet.

Buzz nudged him with his toe. "Get up," he said.

Hickson knocked the man clear across the room. Where he found the strength to deliver the mighty blow he struck he would never know. Normally he couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag but he knocked this thug fifteen feet.

"Damn you! Kick a kid, will you?" The little scientist was raging mad.

Buzz scrambled to his feet. His moon face was black with sudden rage. "You little runt! I'll tear you to pieces with my bare hands. I'll—"

"Come on and try it!"

Hickson was too angry to realize he was facing annihilation or to care. He yanked up his fists in what he imagined was a fighting pose and he looked like a jaybird challenging an elephant. Buzz started toward him.

"Cut it out!" a cold voice said.

Hickson looked around. Rocky hadn't got out of his chair. There was a gun in his hand now and it was covering his companion. "That's enough, Buzz," Rocky said. "That's enough."

Buzz stopped like he had run into the side of a mountain.

"As for you, Doc," Rocky turned to the scientist. "That will be enough out of you too. You wanted to talk to the inventor. Well, there he is. Talk to him." The muzzle of the gun gestured toward the kid on the floor.

FOR a second, Hickson's mouth hung open. He looked from Buzz to Rocky. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the generator on the workbench. He knelt beside the boy on the floor.

"This lad is too weak to talk," he said. "He's too weak to get up. Give me some of that coffee—no, I don't want any whiskey in it—and go get me some sandwiches."

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Half an hour later, warmed by the coffee and strengthened by the food, the youth was sitting up and looking a little dazedly at Hickson.

"It's all right, son," Hickson said. "I'm not going to hurt you. What's your name?"

"Bill," the youth answered hesitantly. "Bill Queen."

His gaze went from Hickson to Rocky and Buzz and fear crept into his eyes. There was fear in his voice as if he was expecting another kick. It was obvious there had been far more kicks than pats in his life. Hickson sensed this. His voice was very gentle.

"Bill," the scientist said, pointing toward the generator. "Did you invent this?"

The kid nodded. "It's mine," he said. "Or it was mine until they took it away from me."

Hickson's voice was a whisper. We'll take it away from them, Bill, you and me." Aloud he said, "That's fine, Bill. Tell me, how does it work?" The kid's eyes lighted with sudden hope at the whispered words.

"What are you two whispering about?" Rocky demanded.

"Whispering? Who's whispering?" Hickson's voice was bland. "You must be hearing things, Rocky."

The thug said nothing. But his eyes faded to the color of cold steel.

Hickson turned to the youth. He was as much or more interested in Bill Queen as he was in the kid's invention. This youngster had produced a miracle. Judging from his clothes and his thin body, there must have been a lot of times in his life when he hadn't had enough to eat, but in spite of his obvious lack of advantages and opportunities he had invented a generator that flouted and set aside the laws of nature as science knew them.

"Where does the current come from?" Hickson questioned. "What is the source of the electricity that drives the big motor?"

Bill Queen answered promptly. "It comes from the earth's magnetic field."

"What?"

"The earth is a huge magnet," the youth answered. "There is a tremendous magnetic tension existing between the two poles. This generator draws power from the magnetic tension of the earth."

Hickson fumbled around in his pocket for his battered pipe. He filled it, crammed the tobacco down. "Listen, Bill," he said patiently. "I know the earth is a big magnet. I know there is a magnetic stress between the north and south poles. But that's magnetism, Bill, and electricity, not magnetism, runs motors. A moving electric current generates magnetic stress around the wire over which it is flowing but magnetism and electricity are not the same thing, not by a jugfull."

THE youth was puzzled. He groped for words. "I know they aren't the same thing, but they're different forms of the same thing and one can be changed into the other if you know how to do it. That's what my generator does—it converts the magnetic stress of the earth into electrical current."

"God Almighty!" the startled scientist gasped. " 'Matter and energy are different aspects of the same thing.' " He smacked closed fist into open palm. "Bill, do you know you've provided the proof for one of Einstein's most complicated theorems, that you've demonstrated what was up until now only an extremely involved mathematical equation? Holy Moses, kid, do you know what kind of a genius that makes you? Do you know that, Bill, do you know it?"

"I don't give a damn what kind of a

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genius it makes him," Rocky's cold voice interrupted. "You two cut out that scientific double-talk and get down to business. I got enough sense to know I probably wouldn't understand why that thing works even if you tell me. And I'm not too much interested in why it works. What I'm interested in is why it don't work. You don't have to tell me why it don't work. All you've got to do is make it work all the time, and I'm not kiddin' when I say I want the job done but quick!"

Rocky's voice was icy cold. He had taken the gun out of his pocket again. It was a heavy caliber bulldog revolver with a short barrel, the gun a killer chooses when he expects to work at close range. Except for the tommy-gun, which is more cumbersome and much bigger, it was one of the most deadly short range weapons ever devised by man.

"Bill," said Hickson seriously. "I'm not going to try to kid you. We're in a spot, you and I. The only way I see to get off that spot is to make your generator work all the time."

Fear twisted the youth's face. It was not fear of Rocky or of the gun Rocky held. Bill Queen knew what Rocky's gun meant and he was afraid of that, but this fear was a deeper thing than the fear of a gun. "Gosh, sir," he whispered. "I can't do that."

"Why?"

"It's—" The kid stumbled over the words. "I can't say it— It's in my mind."

"What's in your mind, Bill? Try to tell me."

"I'm different from other people. I'm different, inside. There's a buzzing in my mind. It comes and goes. I can't start it and I can't stop it. When the buzzing is in my mind, the generator works. When the buzzing stops, the power stops."

Heavy silence fell in that dismal garage back room. Rocky and Buzz had listened carefully, the latter with a blank look on his face, Rocky with a hard expression that hid his real feelings. Hickson didn't say a word but his keen eyes never wavered from the kid's face. In Hickson's opinion, Bill Queen was telling the truth as he knew it. If the kid was lying, he was an expert in that line. The fact that the statement he had made was beyond the bounds of human knowledge—or human credulity—left no expression on his face.

"Oh, Lord," Hickson thought. "Oh, Lord—"

"It just works that way," Bill Queen repeated. "When the buzzing is going in my mind, the generator is working. When the buzzing stops, the current stops. And there is nothing I can do to start or stop the buzzing. I've tried."

HICKSON was cold inside, colder than he had ever been in all his life. Right down to the soles of his shoes, he was scared. Rocky had scared him but it had been surface scare. Bill Queen's words scared him all the way through, raising an ancient primitive fear akin to the fear of the cave man for the darkness. If Bill Queen was telling the truth, if he knew the truth to tell, he was opening a window into the darkness where the secrets of the universe were hidden. Hickson wondered if he had the courage to look through that window.

The kid's statement seemed so preposterous, so incredible, so impossible! He was really saying there was a connection between his mind and the operation of the generator. On what etheric level would that connection lie? What was the frequency of human thinking? What was the wavelength of the radiations flowing from Bill Queen's mind to

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the generator he had invented?

There was no question that the human mind radiated electrical impulses, that mental phenomena were electrochemical in nature. Efforts had been made to build radio equipment that would receive mental impulses but no one had been able to build a radio set that operated on the level of human thought. The efforts had failed. Hickson knew a little about those efforts, more important than that he knew that all scientific thinking was tending more and more to interpret the universe in terms of thought. What was it Jeans had said? "The universe is beginning to look more like a great thought than like a great machine." Enough books to fill a library had already been written on the relationship of mind and matter and more were being added every year as the scientists realized more and more that the most important phenomenon, the most important factor, in the universe, was mind. Mind and matter, mind over matter. Bill Queen's mind controlled the flow of energy and energy and matter were different aspects of the same thing.

"Holy Moses!" Hickson said softly. "And I only thought you were a genius. I didn't know you were a genius who could work a miracle."

"But I can't work it, not when I want to. That's the catch, sir."

"You will work it," Rocky spoke. The thug had risen from his chair and was walking toward them. He looked at his watch. "You will work it in exactly thirty minutes, or else."

"But Rocky—" Hickson protested.

"Nuts!" the thug answered. "Maybe you're goin' to fall for that line of gab he's handing out but I'm not. His gadget only works when there's a buzzin' in his mind! I never heard a bigger bunch of crap in all my life!"

"It's the truth!" Bill Queen vehemently protested. "And it won't work at all if I'm over a hundred feet away from it, no matter if my mind is buzzing. That's the limit of my control. It gets weaker as I get farther away. There isn't a thing I can do about it, not a single thing!"

"Yeah. Well—" He tapped the revolver. "—this thing is going to be buzzin' in exactly thirty minutes if you don't come through with the real dope."

"But—" Hickson shouted.

"No buts!" Rocky answered. He looked at his watch. "Twenty-nine minutes is all you got left now. You better get goin'. Buzz," he spoke to his companion. "Go get the blow torch. If they haven't got this workin on time, we'll give 'em a little taste of the torch on their feet. That'll help 'em get the job done, I bet."

BUZZ grinned, left the room. A few minutes later he returned with the torch, sat it on the floor, pumped it up, dribbled gasoline into the preheating pan.

Elaborately unconcerned, Hickson walked over to the man. With all his might he kicked the blowtorch against the wall. Sputtering, it hit the wall, exploded with a *whoom!* showered the room with blazing gasoline.

"Run, Bill!" he shouted. "Run like the devil!"

Part of the flaming liquid had hit Rocky, was blazing on his clothes. He slapped at it, trying to put it out. Hickson paused long enough to scoop a heavy wrench from the workbench. Through the smoke and flame he dived at the thug. Rocky saw him coming, jerked up the pistol.

The gun thundered in the room. The heavy slug struck Hickson, spun him around. The bullet fired from this gun was designed to stop a man cold. It stopped Hickson, knocked him down.

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Rocky slapped at the flame on his clothes.

"Get the fire extinguisher, Buzz," he calmly ordered. "There's one up front. When we get the fire out, we'll give Doc here a taste of his own medicine."

Hickson tried to get up. Something warm was running down his side but he could breathe. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Bill Queen. The sight brought profanity to his lips. The kid hadn't run when he had the chance. He could have gotten through the door. Rocky couldn't have dodged gasoline and shot both of them at the same time. Bill hadn't tried to run. He had turned to the generator, grabbed a coil of heavy wire from the table, jerked open the switch that controlled the flow of current to the big motor. The crazy combination of coils that looked like the magneto from a Model T was spinning slowly on its axis. It rotated with all the sedate sureness of a minor planet. The radio tubes were burning.

Rocky slapped out the last glowing patch on his clothing. His eyebrows were missing, flame had reddened his face, his hands were probably raw, gasoline was still burning brightly on the wall and on the floor, but Rocky was still master of the situation. Footsteps pounded on the concrete floor of the garage. Buzz, carrying the fire extinguisher, burst into the room.

Water would not put out a gasoline fire but the foam from this extinguisher smothered it. Buzz sprayed the wall. The brightly burning flame began to go out. As it went out, Hickson's hopes went with it. He barely saw the looped end of the wire drop down on Rocky and when he did see it, he was slow in interpreting its meaning.

The loop of wire seemed to come from nowhere. A split second after the loop went around Rocky and dropped down over his body, Hickson saw that Bill Queen had thrown it. The other end of the wire was connected to the switch that controlled the flow of current to the big testing motor.

Rocky jerked startled eyes toward the workbench when the wire hit him. Instantly he realized what the wire meant. Savagely he tore at it with his left hand. With his right hand he brought up the deadly bulldog revolver, centered it on the kid at the workbench.

Bill Queen slammed the switch home.

The gun thundered.

As the thug pulled the trigger, Bill Queen dived under the bench.

"Oh Lord!" Hickson gasped. "If it only works!" He forced himself to his feet, looked around for a weapon. His right arm was numbed and useless. There wasn't a damned thing he could do to help, except pray. He prayed.

Hissss—crackle!

The *hissss* was the hiss of a snake magnified a thousand times. The *crackle* was the sharp splintering that goes with the lightning flash. Together they were the sound of a heavy current tearing through an obstruction, leaping across a heavy resistance, fighting its way through a poor conductor.

ROCKY screamed. His hair stood straight up, each individual strand trying to get away from its fellows. Little flickering sparks jetted out through his clothing. Electric flame sputtered between the soles of his shoes and the floor as the current carried by the single wire fought its way through a poor ground back to its source.

The thug screamed again. His body jerked in a wild contortion. He leaped five feet high, the tortured muscles going into spasms as they tried to get away from the surge of the electric current. He fell heavily, rolled and threshed, stiffened, jerked, stiffened again. The frying sound went on and

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on. Little electric sparks poked through his clothes, danced from his fingers to the floor, fighting the resistance of the poor ground.

Buzz, his moonface blank with lack of comprehension, stared at his leader. He screamed, flung the fire extinguisher from him, raced through the open door. His feet pounded through the garage. He didn't even stop to use the car. He went straight on.

Bill Queen poked an ashen face up over the workbench. He looked at Rocky, then at Hickson. "When he shot you, the buzzing started in my mind," he whispered. "I knew, if I could get a wire from the generator to him, what would happen."

Hickson was silent. The frying sound went on and on. Bill Queen reached cautiously up over the bench, yanked the switch open. The frying sound died out.

"Come on, Bill," Hickson shakily said. "We got to get out of here. We got to get out of here."

Dawn was in the sky as they slipped out of the old abandoned garage. After a startled and irritated physician, a firm friend of the scientist, had patched up Hickson's wound and been sworn to silence, they went home. Home was Hickson's tumbled bachelor apartment. After that, it was home to Bill Queen too.

Hickson and Bill spend their spare time together now, working, playing, studying. The best psychologists in the nation have studied Bill Queen's mind. They say he is a freak, that somehow or other under certain conditions, his mind is able to control the flow of electric current. They don't know how he does it. Hickson and Bill are working trying to find out. To Hickson, Bill's mind is a window opening out into the darkness where the secrets of the universe are hidden. They're trying to look through that window, to see what's out there in the no-man's-land that lies beyond the limits of the world.

THE END

SUPERNATURAL WONDERMENT

★ By PETE BOGG ★

EACH generation can give an account of happenings which will make even the most conservative of mortals wonder about the possibility of certain supernatural forces working throughout our everyday lives. It is possible that these unexplainable incidents may not be pure figments of an overworked imagination, but have a real basis though unexplainable to even the cleverest people.

Centuries ago in an obscure Italian monastery there lived a very respected and loved monk named Alphonsus Liguori. This man had a mysterious and unexplainable experience which even when related in this present day makes one feel as if they have delved into the mysterious realm of the supernatural. One day Liguori fell into a deathlike sleep which caused his brother monks concern about his life. They held a special mass on his behalf, and were about to administer the last earthly rites when he woke up. Upon reviving from his deep state of unconsciousness the monk had no recollection of even having been asleep. Instead, he insisted that he had just returned from Rome. He told the inmates of the monastery of the death of the Pope and described his presence at the bedside of the pope during his last hours. Naturally, no one in the monastery believed this story. They had seen Liguori in his peculiar state of deep slumber. They thought that he was suffering a grave mental disturbance from the recent ordeal which he had just passed through. Not many days after this fantastic affair, a messenger arrived at the monastery and announced the death of the Pope just as Liguori had related it. Even the day and the hour coincided with Brother Liguori's story.

How is it possible for a human being to be at two places at the same time? Can the mind really take flight and leave the body long enough to experience situations which would be utterly impossible under normal conditions? Does man really live a double life? One of his lives might well be the ordinary everyday humdrum, and the other might be lived in the mysterious region of his subconscious. What an overpowering possibility!

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Vignettes OF FAMOUS SCIENTISTS

By ALEXANDER BLADE

HAECKEL

ERNST HEINRICH HAECKEL was born at Potsdam, Germany, on February 16, 1834. He studied medicine and science at the Universities of Berlin and Jena. After practicing the medical profession for a year, and finding the work uncongenial, he decided to devote himself to the natural sciences and particularly to zoology. With that end in view he studied marine life at the island of Heligoland, at Naples, and at Messian. As a result of the publication of his investigations at these places, he was appointed to the chair of zoology at the University of Jena, and while occupying that position he was able to make numerous journeys to other places where observations of oceanic life could be conducted advantageously, as the Canary islands, the Norwegian coast, the Red and Adriatic seas, Ceylon, and the East Indies. Each of these furnished the material for the publication of a monograph of great value to science, as he was a close and accurate observer, and a clear reasoner.

When Darwin's "Origin of Species" appeared, Haeckel became an enthusiastic and generous advocate of evolution, and did more than any other continental writer of the time to disseminate its principles among the intelligent classes of central Europe. He was the first German biologist to give a wholehearted adherence to the doctrine of organic evolution, and Darwin himself believed that Haeckel's enthusiastic propagandism was the chief factor of the success of the doctrine in Germany.

Haeckel is now remembered mainly on account of his celebrated biogenetic law, the germ of which had already been hinted at by Baer, Agassiz and Fritz Müller. It may be concisely stated as follows:

"Every individual organism, in its development from the ovum, goes through a series of evolutionary stages, in each of which it represents a stage of the evolution of the class to which it belongs; and every such organism breeds true in so far as it is influenced by heredity, and becomes modified in so far as it is influenced by the conditions of its environment."

Haeckel's well-known "gastraea" theory is an outcome of this generalization. He divided animal creation into the Protozoa or unicellular animals, and the Metazoa or multicellular animals. In the Metazoa the single primitive egg-cell is transformed by cleavage into a globular mass of cells, which first becomes a hollow vesicle and then changes into the *gastrula*. The simplest multicellular animal resembles this gastrula with its two primary layers, ectoderm and endoderm, and the earliest hypothetical form of this kind, from which the higher animals are probably descended, may be called the "gastraea."

HAECKEL was the first to draw up a geneological tree of the relationship between the various orders of animals. His efforts in this direction culminated in the paper he read before the fourth International Zoological Congress, held at Cambridge in 1898, when he traced the descent of the human race in 26 stages from organisms like the still-existing *Monera*, simple structureless masses of protoplasm, and the unicellular *Protista*, through the chimpanzees and the *Pithecanthropus erectus*, which he regarded as the link between primitive man and the anthropoid apes.

His attempt to apply the doctrine of evolution to the problems of philosophy and religion appeared in *Die Weltratsel (The Riddle of the Universe*, 1900). Adopting an uncompromising monistic attitude, he asserted the essential unity of organic and inorganic nature. For him the chemicophysical properties of carbon in its complex albuminoid compounds are the sole and the mechanical causes of the specific phenomena of movement which distinguish organic from inorganic substances, and the first development of living protoplasm, as seen in the *Monera*, arises from such nitrogenous carbon-compounds by spontaneous generation. Psychology he regarded as merely a branch of physiology. Every living cell has psychic properties, and the psychic life of multicellular organisms is the sum-total of the psychic functions of the cells of which they are composed. Moreover, just as the highest animals have evolved from the simplest forms of life, so the highest human faculties have evolved from the soul of animals. Consequently Haeckel denied the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will, and the existence of a personal God.

Although Haeckel occupies no serious position in the history of philosophy, there can be no doubt that he was very widely read in his own day, and that he is very typical of the school of extreme evolutionist thought. He died at Jena on August 8, 1919.

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Man of Two Worlds

By Robert Moore Williams

John Rand found himself living two complete lives, and he had to make a choice between them.

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THE cave bear reared up on his hind legs and opened a cavernous mouth bristling with yellow teeth.

"Owooom!" he thundered deep in his throat.

The witch doctor whom the cave people called Murk took one look at the monstrous beast and his courage failed. When the bear growled, Murk forgot all the spells and potions with which he had been boasting he would conquer this nightmare animal. Dropping his bag of magic tricks, he scuttled like a frightened rabbit around the side of the mountain.

Rand of the Caves leaped lithely to an overhanging ledge when the bear reared up in front of them. He pulled himself up, glanced at Murk, grinned

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as he saw how his erstwhile companion was running.

"When the cave bear growls, the witch doctor runs," he thought. There was satisfaction in this thought. Murk had exposed himself as a coward. Now the fear of his magic would be lessened among the cave people.

Rand notched a flint-tipped arrow on the string of his bow. The great oak stave creaked as the feathered end of the arrow came slowly back to his ear. The bow string, made of the carefully prepared tendons of the great elk, throbbed with the mounting pressure. Then Rand released the arrow.

The feathered shaft was a streak of light darting through the air.

Thud!

It buried itself half-way up to the feathers in the shaggy chest of the great cave bear.

"Owoom!" the bear roared.

"Yaaaa!" Rand yelled.

He notched another arrow on the string. Exultant strength flowed through him as the great bow creaked. He was Rand of the Caves, Rand, the mighty hunter. No one else in the cave tribe could bend this great bow. No one else had the strength and the skill to shoot his arrows so far or with such deadly accuracy as Rand of the Caves. He exulted in his strength.

Thud!

The second arrow went home.

It struck a little lower than the first one. Hitting just below the heavy chest bones, it penetrated deeply.

"Owoom!" the bear roared.

He was the mighty monster of the mountains, was this bear. Bigger, stronger, faster than the grizzly, he was a giant of the earth. All creatures lived in awe of him. When he chose a path, all lesser animals got hastily out of his way. When he roared, the hills were still. When he charged, the ground shook.

He was the great cave bear.

THE people of the caves had never killed a great cave bear. Like the animals of this dawn world, they lived in awe of him. In his mighty arms, he could crush a dozen of them to death. With one snap of his mouth, he could mangle a man. With a single sweep of his mighty paw, he could turn a man into a mass of shattered flesh and broken bones.

Like the animals, the people of the caves got out of his way when they saw him. His path was his alone, never disputed.

Rand of the Caves and Murk the witch doctor had come seeking the cave bear. Rand had come because of his strength, he feared nothing, not even a cave bear. Murk had come because he resented Rand's growing power over the cave people, because he wished to discredit his rival.

Murk had taken one look at the beast they sought and had run.

Rand had leaped up on a ledge and bent the great bow.

His third arrow drove into the cave bear, sank into the vitals of the beast, stung him.

"Yaaaa!" Rand yelled derisively. Somewhere back along the path they had come hunters were watching. They would see him shoot the bear, hear his taunting yells, know his bravery.

The bear saw him on the ledge. For a few minutes it had been in doubt as to what was stinging it. The arrows moved so swiftly the bear could not see them. But it felt them when they struck, felt the sharp flint points. It saw Rand on the ledge and realized he must be the source of those sharp stinging pains.

And charged him.

Dropping on all fours, it roared

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across the open space and hurled its monstrous body upward to the ledge.

Rand's fourth arrow, striking from above, inflicted no more than a scratch.

Seconds later, Rand, leaping hastily back from the edge of the ledge, was looking at two taloned forepaws gouging grooves in the rock as the bear tried to lift itself up over the edge of the shelf.

Shoulder muscles humped upward, hind legs scratching furiously for a grip on the slanting edge of the cliff, the cave bear was trying to lift itself up to the ledge.

Rand hastily notched another arrow.

"Owoom!" the bear roared, as it felt for a foothold that would lift it upward.

Rand drove the arrow straight into the bear's open mouth.

The bear lost its grip on the ledge and fell backward.

"Ya!" Rand exulted.

He had forced the bear to retreat, he had won a victory.

He ran to the edge and looked over.

The bear was scrambling along the side of the ledge toward a low place where it could easily climb up.

Rand thought: "It will come up here like an express train going down grade."

HE KNEW it was odd of him to think in terms of express trains. Rand of the Caves had never heard of express trains. The sight of one would scare a cave dweller out of his wits. Express trains were thousands of years in the future. But to Rand the charge of the bear would be like the resistless sweep of an express train running at full speed. The fact that he, a cave dweller, could think in terms of express trains—even if the thought was very vague and indefinite—was something he never quite forgot or clearly remembered.

One thing he knew for certain: he couldn't face the charge of the bear. A hundred men couldn't face the charge of the cave bear. It would scatter them like so many dead leaves in the blast from a hurricane.

Rand turned and ran along the ledge away from the bear.

"Woof!" came the sound behind him.

Turning his head, he saw the bear had found the low place and had scrambled up on the ledge.

He ran faster. And stopped abruptly.

In front of his feet the ledge ended.

A fall of rock had scraped the side of the mountain bare.

He could leap over the edge of the ledge, land twenty feet down, and run downhill.

If he went that way, the bear would follow him. Downhill the mighty beast could run with terrific speed.

Fifteen feet above Rand was another ledge.

If he went that way the bear couldn't follow him.

But if he leaped for the ledge above him, and didn't make it—

Boulders rattled behind him as the bear charged upward. Rand heard the scrape of clawed feet, heard the fierce panting of the beast.

He tossed his bow upward. It landed on the ledge above him. He scrambled after it. His grasping fingers sought and found holds on the rock. They reached the edge of the ledge above him. He started to pull himself up.

His right foot, pressed against a tiny projection on the face of the cliff, slipped.

He was left hanging to the edge of the ledge with the tips of his fingers.

He felt his fingers begin to slip.

The bear had reared up against the face of the cliff and was reaching upward for him.

His fingers continued to slip. He felt desperately for a foothold for his feet.

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And found none.

"This—" the thought was in his mind. "This is where I came in."

"Rand!" a voice panted above him. He heard the swift rustle of moccasin-clad feet.

Two strong hands grasped his wrist.

"Up," a voice said above him. "Up, Rand."

The two strong hands helping him, he pulled himself up on the ledge.

Below him the disappointed cave bear growled and leaped against the cliff.

Rand looked into the eyes of the woman whom the cave people called Peg. It was she who had grasped his wrists and pulled him to safety.

SHE was tall and lithe and strongly built, was Peg of the Caves. A short skirt of deerskin circled her waist. Her legs were bare, her feet clad in tanned moccasins. Above her bare waist her full breasts were protected by laced leather pads. Her brown hair, cut short, was tied in a knot on the back of her head. Her bow and a quiver of arrows lay on the ledge where she had dropped them.

In that moment she was the most beautiful creature Rand of the Caves had seen in all his life.

"Thanks, Peg," he said, panting for breath. "But for you in another minute I was bear meat."

"I saw your fight, Rand," she answered. "I was looking down and I could see what you couldn't see, that the lower edge ended. I guessed you would try to climb up to the next ledge so I put myself in a place where I could help you if you needed it."

"Well, Peg," Rand answered. "Thanks again. Any man who hunts the great bear needs all the help he can get. Your fast thinking saved my life. Now we will finish off this bear."

He picked up the great bow, notched an arrow. She picked up her weapons. They poured arrows downward. The great beast shrugged them off. Most of them did not even penetrate the matted fur and the thick hide.

Only in the stomach would arrows hurt the cave bear. And his stomach was down.

Rand stopped when he had only three arrows left in his quiver.

"We need a mightier weapon," he said. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the thought of a weapon that you held to your shoulder, a weapon that puffed smoke and thunder, striking down the target against which it was aimed. If he only had that weapon! Even the cave bear could not stand against it.

But he didn't have it. That weapon was only something in the dark depths of his strange mind. There was no such weapon in the world of the caves. He looked around. There was a huge boulder on the ledge. He laid down his bow.

The boulder was so heavy that Peg had to help him lift it. Panting, the two carried it to the edge of the ledge. The bear was below them on the lower ledge.

They aimed the boulder carefully, dropped it.

In this world of the caves a huge boulder could be a weapon.

It struck the bear in the middle of his back. There was a sharp crack of a breaking spinal column. The beast gave a convulsive lunge and fell from the ledge. He hit with a thud, fell end over end.

When the bear stopped sliding it was lying in the place where Rand and Murk had been standing when they first sighted it.

It did not move.

Rand and Peg stared round-eyed at each other.

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In the mind of each was a wondrous thought.

They had killed a cave bear!

They had killed the animal that the cave people had never killed before.

Their wonder grew and grew.

They had done a mighty thing.

They started down the side of the mountain to the bear.

II

THEY stood beside the bear.

In death the mighty animal somehow looked a little smaller. Death had deflated it. It had fallen, Rand saw, on Murk's bag of magic tricks that the witch doctor had thrown away as he fled. Rand thought about the way Murk had run. He, Rand of the Caves, had stayed and fought. With Peg, he had killed the great bear.

Now he was greater than Murk. The people of the caves would recognize his greatness. They would laugh at Murk when the witch doctor tried to impress them with his magic.

"His skin will make a fine robe," Rand said. "We will tan it carefully and next winter it will keep us warm."

In the world of the caves a proposal of marriage was a simple thing.

Rand saw the pulse leap in her brown throat as he spoke.

"Rand—"

"I mean it," Rand said. "Otherwise I would not have spoken. Next winter the robe will keep us warm. When the fires die out in the cave at night, the robe will keep us warm."

That was all he said on the subject. Mating here was a simple process.

"Now we will skin the bear," he said.

He bent down, pulled the flint knife from the skin scabbard at his waist. The skin was tough. He sawed at it. The knife was only sharp in places. In his mind somewhere was the dim thought of a different kind of knife, a knife that was exceedingly sharp, with a blade that glittered like fire.

Where had he seen such a knife?

He shook his head. He could not remember the where or the when, but the thought of the knife, like the thought of the express train, was somehow in his mind.

Peg knelt beside him, helped him pull the skin taut so the flint blade could cut it easier. They had been working for several minutes before Rand realized he was hearing voices.

He looked up.

The party of hunters was looking down at him and Peg. Mark was with them.

"Ho," he called. "Come down. Come down and see the great bear that we have killed."

They came sliding down the side of the mountain, their eyes wide with awe.

"He has killed the great bear!" one said.

"Rand has killed the bear," a second added.

A third made the connection between Rand and the killing of the bear.

"Rand is a mighty hunter," the third said. "He is the mightiest hunter among the cave people."

Rand glowed at the words. A little praise was good for any man. He did not let his pleasure show on his face, however. They might think he was vain if they saw how pleased he was.

BESIDE him, Peg worked harder than ever to hide her pleasure at the words of the hunters. It was something to be the mate of Rand of the Caves. She was thrilled and pleased.

Only Murk was not pleased. He walked slowly around the bear as if to make certain it was actually dead. Rand said nothing about the way Murk had run when they found the bear.

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"My magic helped," Murk said suddenly. "If it hadn't been for my magic, the bear would still be alive."

Peg looked up quickly. She liked this miserable witch doctor as little as Rand but he motioned her to silence when she would have spoken.

"My magic helped," Murk repeated.

Murk's claim impressed the already awed hunters. To them, living in the time before the dawn of history, the world was filled with magic. When the clouds moved through the sky, it was magic that made them move. The lightning was an angry demon and the thunder was his voice shouting in the heavens. The sun was a great god that ruled the sky by day and the moon was a little god that ruled by night. Every hill and every mountain was the abode of spirits, every tree and every grove had its unseen inhabitants. Every animal in the forests, every fish in the streams, every bird that flew, each had its familiar spirit. When the hunter returned empty handed, the spirits had scared the game away.

In this land where spirits were everywhere, the witch doctor who claimed to control them was a mighty, much-feared man.

"It was my magic," Murk claimed. "Without my magic the bear would not have died."

He was determined to claim at least part of the credit.

"Pooh!" Rand said.

This had gone far enough. If Murk was going to insist that he had helped kill the bear, Rand was going to tell the truth. He had Peg to back him up.

"My magic helped," Murk insisted. "In fact, my magic did more than help. It really killed the bear."

"It killed the bear!" Rand exploded. "That's a lie!"

"I can prove it!" Murk answered.

"You can't prove a lie," Rand said hotly. He looked at the faces of the hunters. They were already impressed by this conflict between Rand and the witch doctor. He sought to impress them further. "When we first found the bear," he said slowly, "Murk ran. When the bear roared, Murk dropped his magic and ran. I have never seen a man run faster than Murk."

His statement impressed them all right. They had no respect for a man who ran.

"While Murk ran, Rand stayed and fought the bear," Peg spoke up. "I saw it all. Rand shot his arrows into the bear while Murk was running in fear."

Her words added to the impression Rand had made. Several of the hunters looked doubtfully at Murk.

A WITCH doctor whom the hunters doubted, a witch doctor whom the tribe thought a coward, was a witch doctor who might as well commit suicide.

Murk saw what the hunters were thinking about him, knew its consequences.

"I said my magic killed the bear," he raged. "And I can prove it."

"Try and prove it then," Rand jeered. "Peg and I saw you run."

"I did run," Murk admitted. He looked around the group to see the effect of words.

The hunters scowled at him now.

"He admits he ran," one of them said.

"Certainly I ran," Murk promptly said. "I ran merely to lure the bear to chase me. When I ran I left my magic behind as a trap. See!" Exultation boomed in his voice. "See how well my trap worked. When the bear came to my magic bag it dropped over dead. See! There is my proof. There is my magic bag under the bear!"

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He pointed dramatically to his bag of magic tricks. One corner of it was visible under the shoulder of the bear.

"As soon as the bear touched my bag, it fell over dead," Murk repeated. "My magic killed the bear."

"It is a lie!" Rand yelled. It is a lie." He leaped to his feet. "Peg and I slew the bear up on the ledge, slew it by rolling down a great stone that broke its back. It fell down here—"

He stopped. The faces of the hunters showed they were not listening to him.

"They believe Murk," Peg whispered. "His magic bag is under the bear. They believe his magic really killed it."

The reasoning of the people of this dawn world was often wide of cause and effect. The bear had died on the witch doctor's bag of magic tricks. Therefore it had been killed by magic. No matter if Rand and Peg had dropped a stone that broke its back, magic had really killed it.

This was what the hunters believed. They could see the bag with their own eyes. They knew it belonged to Murk. There was no way to dispute such proof.

"I claim the skin!" Murk exulted. "Rand can have the meat but the skin is mine."

"You lying rat," Rand said. He was aware of three things. The first was a tremendous rage burning within him. Murk had cheated him, had outmaneuvered him. This fact enraged him.

The second thing he was aware of was a knife in his hand.

It would be so pleasant to drive that stone knife up to the hilt in Murk's throat.

The third thing he was aware of was voices.

The voices came from far away but were growing stronger. They tugged at him, pulled at him.

As the voices pulled at him, a little by a little the scene on the mountainside, the exultant Murk, the great carcass of the bear, the watching hunters, Peg of the Caves, the huge mass of the mountain towering sky-high above them—all these things began to grow dim.

Vaguely, very vaguely, Rand of the Caves knew what was happening. The fading scene was somehow tied up in his mind with his ability to think of an express train, with his ability to think of a great weapon that when put to the shoulder emitted smoke and thunder, with the memory somehow of another world.

So Rand knew a little of what was happening. It had happened before, many times.

It always irritated him when it happened.

He would much rather be Rand of the Caves than John Rand of the twentieth century.

There was nothing he could do about it.

When that irresistible magnetic pull came, he had to go and he knew it.

The world of the caves faded from his vision. Gone was the towering mountain, gone was the great cave bear, gone was Peg, gone the watching hunters.

He slid into a moving current of etheric force and was carried along by it.

He closed his eyes on Rand of the Caves and opened them again as John Rand of the twentieth century.

III

HE OPENED his eyes as John Rand of the twentieth century. Back somewhere in the dim vastnesses of his mind was the memory of Rand of the Caves. The memory was vague, in-

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definite, formless, but it remained with him, always. He was not quite sure how he knew it but he never forgot that he was John Rand of the twentieth century and Rand of the Caves as well.

He was lying on the couch in his study. There was a rubber mask over his nose and the lower part of his face. A rubber tube led from the mask to the ingenuous equipment on the little table beside the couch, equipment designed to control automatically the flow of nitrous oxide to his lungs.

When he inhaled just the right amount of the proper mixture of nitrous oxide he went to sleep and dreamed.

He always dreamed the same dream.

In that dream he was Rand of the Caves.

He didn't think it was a dream. He thought it was reality. He thought nitrous oxide opened a door through time and that he went through that door and back to the time of the cave people.

Jennie, his wife, thought it was a dream. She thought her husband was mentally deranged. In other words, mildly insane. Not dangerously insane, nothing to get worried about, but not something that you wanted your friends to know about.

She had called in Dr. Peckoff, a famous phychiatrist, to treat Rand's illness.

As he opened his eyes, Rand saw that Jennie and Dr. Peckoff had come into the room. They had turned on the lights and were looking at him.

It was their voices he had heard in the world of the caves. It was their voices that had called him back across time. Their voices, and the snap of the light switch, and the pressure of the light on his eye-lids, had called him back.

They saw he was awake.

Dr. Peckoff made a little gesture with his hands, a gesture which said: "There's your wacky husband. There he is on the couch. In spite of all our efforts to cure him, he's been hitting the nitrous oxide again. Just as soon as we turn our backs, he starts soaking up that stuff."

There was contempt in the gesture. It said plainer than words: "Why do you want to stick with a man like that, Jennie? He's psychopathic, on the border-line of insanity. I'm a psychiatrist and I know. He ought to be in an institution for the care of such people. Then you and I—"

Jennie came across the room. She pretended not to notice the mask and the equipment for controlling the flow of nitrous oxide.

"Hello, dear," she said. "Have you been napping?"

Rand sat up on the couch. He removed the mask, laid it on the table. He was a little dizzy. Fumes from the flask still lingered in his brain.

He pretended not to notice they had caught him using nitrous oxide again.

"Yes," he said. "I took a little nap. How was the show?"

She and Peckoff had gone to see a play.

"We enjoyed it," she answered. "I wish you had come with us. I think you would have enjoyed it too."

She still pretended not to notice the mask, emphasizing the disharmony that had grown up between them. He wished he could eliminate that disharmony. He wished they could be close and cosy again, he wished they could have that feeling of one-ness they had once had—before he had begun to experiment with nitrous oxide.

It was hard to decide which was the more important, his experiments, his eternal search for the truth that lay hidden somewhere behind the shadow of reality, or his wife.

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He was afraid he couldn't have both.

His mind was still tangled up with memories of Rand of the Caves, of Murk, and of Peg, who had saved his life back there in that long-gone time.

ONLY it wasn't long-gone. People thought time came and went, they thought it passed by and was forever gone. This was not right, John Rand thought. He thought there wasn't any past, there wasn't any future. There was only *now*. Rand of the Caves and John Rand of the twentieth century both existed *now*. They were separated by a curious dimensional veil, by a dimensional gulf, which human consciousness misinterpreted as past and future, but they both existed *now*. John Rand's *now* was a curious word, but it meant something definite to him.

Nitrous oxide was a path through that veil, a bridge across that dimensional gulf.

Or was it?

He believed it was. He believed he was both John Rand of the twentieth century and Rand of the Caves. Of the two worlds in which he believed he lived, he much preferred the world of Rand of the Caves. The life of Rand of the Caves was much more satisfying than the life of John Rand, wealthy but somewhat eccentric stock broker.

John Rand had inherited his wealth. He hadn't had to fight for it. Perhaps that was why it didn't interest him.

Rand of the Caves had to fight for everything he got. Nothing came easily to the cave people. If they wanted a bow, they had to cut the wood laboriously by hand, trimming and scraping the stave with stone knives. They had to make the string of the bow themselves, they had to manufacture their own arrows, finding the flint, chipping the heads, smoothing and straightening the shafts, catching the bird for the feathers, then diligently attaching the feathers.

Nothing came easy back in that world. You found your own food or you went hungry. You either killed the deer, tanned the hide, and made your own clothes, or you suffered from the cold. Every day was a fight.

In the twentieth century John Rand's food was prepared for him by expert cooks, it was served by silent waiters, it was placed on exquisite china which in turn sat on snow-white table cloths. His clothes were made for him by excellent tailors. His chauffeur took him to his office.

At his office were men hired to work for him.

Everything was done for him.

Everything.

He looked at Jennie.

Well, not quite everything. But even between him and Jennie there was a bar of discord that prevented their full enjoyment of each other.

He was sick of it.

The raw red meat of life had been civilized out of him. He was a hunter. All men were hunters.

They were hunters who lived in cities where there was nothing to hunt.

They were hunters stalking field mice with elephant guns.

They hunted rabbits with bows strong enough to bring down a running elk.

They didn't want to stalk mice, they didn't want to hunt rabbits.

There was just nothing else to stalk, there was nothing else to hunt.

Emotionally men were cave dwellers. But they lived in cities. Asphalt under their feet and four walls around them and steam radiators in their rooms.

There were stars overhead but they couldn't see them for the glare of neon.

John Rand was sick of it.

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JENNIE pretended not to notice the nitrous oxide equipment. Peckoff was under no such compulsions.

"I thought I told you to leave that stuff alone," he said.

His voice was harsh.

He was the doctor laying down the law to the patient, the doctor giving orders.

His tone raised the hair along the back of John Rand's neck.

"You go to hell," Rand answered.

The two men bristled at each other like strange dogs. Peckoff's emotions were out of control. He was a psychiatrist, he knew better than to snarl at a patient. Jennie accounted for his lack of emotional control. Jennie accounted for his snarl. He wanted Jennie.

She complicated the situation.

Two men and one woman.

She knew she was complicating the situation.

"Would you like something to eat?" she said hastily. "Would you like some bacon and scrambled eggs?"

Rand looked at his watch. The time was past midnight. "The cook's gone," he said.

Without a cook, how could he have bacon and eggs?

"I'll fix them myself," Jennie said.

Rand stared at his wife in ill-concealed astonishment. *She* was going to fix the bacon and eggs.

The idea baffled him.

So far as he knew, she couldn't even make coffee.

She, too, belonged to the twentieth century world of luxury, to his world, to the world where people did things for you because you couldn't do them for yourself.

Peg, now, Peg of the Caves, she could help you skin a cave bear, and help you tan the hide, and when winter came, she would be under the bear skin with you, helping you keep warm.

"I can do it," Jennie said.

Rand was so astonished he didn't protest, so astonished he almost forgot about Peckoff. Jennie was going to fix bacon and eggs! There was wonder in the thought.

The two men went with her into the kitchen. There was an electric stove and a refrigerator so big you could have put half a deer in it.

Only you didn't have half a deer.

Back in the caves, where you sometimes had the deer, you needed the refrigerator, needed it badly, and didn't have it. Here you had the ice box, but you didn't have the deer.

JENNIE was pretty darned good at making bacon and eggs. Rand tasted them and smacked his lips.

"What was your pipe dream this time?" Peckoff spoke.

Rand hadn't intended to talk about his dream. Peckoff was forcing to tell things he would rather keep quiet.

"It was the same dream I always have," he answered evasively. "These are excellent eggs, Jennie. I didn't know you could cook."

She blushed with pleasure.

"That cave man stuff?" Peckoff questioned.

"Yes."

Hair was rising again along the back of Rand's neck.

"I don't think it's a dream," he stated.

Jennie looked hurt at his words. Of course it was a dream. It had to be a dream, the result of an imagination distorted by inhaling nitrous oxide.

Peckoff looked pleased. "What do you think it is?" he asked.

"I think I am two men," Rand answered. "If I were a Hindu, I would say think I am the reincarnation of a cave man, but I'm not a Hindu and I don't think I'm the reincarnation of

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anyone. I think I'm actually two men. One of the men is Rand of the Caves. The other is the John Rand you know. I think the nitrous oxide mixture opens a bridge across the time gulf that separates the two of me."

It sounded silly, he knew, when he tried to put it into words. He thought the difficulty in explanation lay not with his understanding but with the words he had to use to explain himself. The meaning that was in his mind would not go into words. The right words hadn't been invented yet. There were no words to describe the reality of time, the real nature of *now*.

Yet out of his extensive reading he knew that other men had done a lot of thinking about time. Rieman, the geometrician, was one. Ouspensky, the Russian mathematician and mystic, was another.

Time was *now*. Time was space imperfectly grasped. Time was the result of a three-dimensional being—man—imperfectly understanding the fourth dimension.

Men had thought these things about time.

"You think nitrous oxide opens a bridge across time?" Peckoff questioned.

Rand nodded.

Peckoff said nothing more but he and Jennie exchanged glances, revealing some secret understanding between them.

Rand saw the glances.

"Are you two hiding something?" he demanded.

"No," Jennie said quickly. "Oh, no, John. What gave you an idea like that."

She looked both startled and sad.

"Are you satisfied?" Peckoff asked.

Rand saw the psychiatrist was not speaking to him but to Jennie.

"I—I—" she hesitated.

"You either are or you aren't," Peckoff stated. "There is no middle ground. Which is it?"

"I guess I'm satisfied," she answered slowly.

Peckoff abruptly rose from his chair. They were eating at the big table in the kitchen, a pleasant change from the stiff formality of the dining room. Peckoff left the kitchen. Rand heard him go to the front door of the big apartment.

Jennie reached across the table and seized Rand's hand in a convulsive grasp.

"Please, John," she whispered. "No matter what happens — remember, we're doing it for you."

He stared at her. "Doing what for me?" he questioned.

She didn't answer.

Peckoff came back into the kitchen.

Two men were following him.

Peckoff pointed to Rand.

"There's your patient," he said. "Grab him before he has a chance to become violent."

IV

WHEN the two men started toward Rand, he got up out of his chair very quickly. He understood, now, the nature of the agreement between Jennie and Peckoff. They had decided he was insane, they had given him an opportunity to prove he was insane, and they had brought along two men to overpower him and to carry him off to an institution.

Jennie had begged him to remember they were trying to help him.

Maybe they were trying to help him but he was not ready to accept help as yet.

Before the two men could get to him, Rand had reached the sink and wrenched open the cabinet drawer un-

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der it.

The set of carving knives was there all right. There were four of them, for kitchen carving, with blades ranging from twelve to six inches in length.

Rand had a knife in each hand when he turned to face the two men.

They saw the knives. And stopped abruptly.

Jennie caught her breath.

Peckoff looked amazed.

There was silence in the big kitchen. The two men eyed the knives. They glanced around at Peckoff for orders.

"Take him," Peckoff directed.

"He has two knives," one of them pointed out.

"What of it? He won't try to use them. The knives are only a bluff. And anyhow you two are hospital attendants who are supposed to know how to handle mentally unbalanced patients."

The two men started again toward Rand.

"Somebody will be sewing your guts up if you come a step closer," Rand said. Something of the voice of Rand of the Caves was in his voice now. Rand of the Caves had a strong, deep-toned voice that men usually obeyed.

The two men stopped quicker than they had started. They drew back a couple of steps. They might be trained in handling mental patients but they didn't like the idea of handling one who had two knives and looked like he was willing to use them.

Rand transferred his gaze to Peckoff.

"So I'm a mental patient, am I?"

"Yes."

"And these two men were brought here to take me to an insane asylum?'

"It will be a private institution," Peckoff answered. "You will receive the best of care—"

"For the rest of my life!" Rand interrupted.

Peckoff didn't answer.

Rand shook his head. "This is little better than kidnapping," he said.

"Oh, no." Peckoff answered. "Our actions are perfectly legal."

"Legal, hell. Do you mean to tell me you can come into my house and carry me away without the formality of a court hearing?"

"Certainly," Peckoff said. "I have commitment papers here . . ." He took a sheaf of papers from his inside coat pocket, tapped them with his index finger. "Properly signed by myself, as a registered psychiatrist, stating that I have examined you, that you are suffering from narco-hallucinosis, and recommending that you be institutionalized. In addition—" He paused and the trace of a smirk showed on his lean face. "—In addition I have papers here, requesting that you be confined to an institution for treatment."

"Requesting?" Rand interrupted. "Who can legally make such a request?"

"Your wife," Peckoff answered. "The wife of an insane person has the legal right to request his confinement —"

Rand was looking at Jennie. 'So this was what you were up to!"

Tears traced jagged lines down her cheeks. "Please. We're doing it for your sake."

"I'll be the judge of what is done for my sake," Rand answered.

"I advise you to submit without resistance," Peckoff stated.

"I have legal papers—"

"And I have two knives," Rand interrupted. He tapped the knives lightly together. The good steel in the blades rang like twin bells.

FOR the moment, the two knives were holding his freedom for him, but he knew that in the long run he couldn't win. The knives only gave him

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a temporary advantage. The papers that Peckoff was fingering were far mightier than the knives. The organized forces of law and order obeyed those papers. One man and two knives would not be difficult for the police to pull down. They would use tear gas, blind him, take him prisoner. Then the fact that he had once threatened violence would be held against him forever.

No, he couldn't win. And the fact that the charge against him was that insiduous, impossible to fight thing—"a mental case"—made his plight all the more impossible. That narco-hallucinosis diagnosis—whatever those words meant—really damned him.

The only way he could escape being locked up in an insane asylum was to convince Peckoff he wasn't insane.

He had to convince the psychiatrist of the reality of the nitrous oxide experience.

He had to prove that Rand of the Caves existed, *now*.

He had to demonstrate that he could make contact with Rand of the Caves.

It was an all but impossible task, especially since Peckoff obviously didn't want to be convinced.

It was all the more impossible because Jennie was aiding the psychiatrist.

When a man's wife and a psychiatrist were in cahoots against him, the man might just as well give himself up. He didn't have a chance.

Rand had to take the chance he didn't have.

Peckoff, after hard thought, seemed to have decided how to meet the situation. He tried reasonable persuasion.

"You seem to have misunderstood our motives, John," he said suavely. When he wanted to use it, he had a voice that dripped oil. He used it now.

"We're trying to help you, John."

"That's what we trying to do," Jennie added.

"You believe that, don't you?" Peckoff continued. "We're trying to make you well again."

"Sure," Rand answered. "And in the meantime, you steal my wife."

The smirk vanished from Peckoff's face. This might be his secret motive all right but he didn't like to have it openly revealed.

Jennie jumped when Rand spoke. She looked at Peckoff with startled eyes.

"Is that what you are trying to do?" she demanded.

Peckoff made a little gesture with his hands. The gesture said: "The vagary of a deranged mind, my dear. Really you can't pay any attention to what he says."

Rand grinned. His remark had uncovered a vein of unsuspected loyalty in Jennie. And it had given him a point to attack.

"That's exactly what he's trying to do," he said.

"Nothing of the kind," Peckoff refuted. "Our relationship is strictly that of a physician and next of kin of a patient. I'm only trying to help you, John."

"All right," Rand said. "I'll let you help me."

"Eh?" The startled look on Peckoff's face was replaced by a suave smile. "Well, that's fine. Just put the knives down and come along with us and I'm sure we'll soon have you in as good a shape as new. We're taking you to an exclusive, private sanitarium. Ostensibly you will be there for a rest. There will be no publicity of any kind."

His moving hands said he knew exactly how to handle these cases.

"Just lay the knives down," he said.

RAND kept the knives in his hands.

"I'll go with you to your sanitarium," he said. "On one condition."

"Eh?" Peckoff's face showed he

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didn't much like the idea of a condition. If any conditions were to be imposed, he preferred to impose them. "What condition is that?" he said slowly.

"That you come into my study and let me give you nitrous oxide."

Rand's only hope of convincing Peckoff of the reality of the nitrous exide experience was to get the psychiatrist to test the gas on himself. After such a test Rand would either know the reality of the experience or he would know he was wacky.

"What?" Peckoff said.

Rand repeated his request.

"Nonsense!" Peckoff blurted out.

"Then you are making a diagnosis without seeing all the evidence," Rand answered. "How do you know whether or not the nitrous oxide experience is real until you have undergone it?"

"I don't need to swallow your poison to know you're sick," Peckoff answered.

Rand tapped the blades of the knives together. The bell note tinkled softly in the kitchen.

"Then I won't go to the sanitarium," he said.

Peckoff didn't like that answer. On the other hand, he didn't like to call the police. Calling the police to get a mental patient to the hospital would not do his reputation any good.

Jennie listened in thoughtful silence. "I don't see anything unreasonable about John's condition," she said.

"Eh?" the startled psychiatrtist gasped. This attack was from a quarter he had not anticipated.

"After all, nitrous oxide obviously won't kill you. John has been working with it for months. I don't see why you should refuse to take a little of it, especially when John will go with you after that."

Peckoff was trapped before he knew it.

"All right, all right," he shrugged. "But I never heard of such nonsense."

"You can put it on your bill," Rand said maliciously.

V

THE two hospital attendants Rand tied very securely together. He left them sitting on the floor.

"Sorry to have to do this but I'm not going to take the chance of having you grab me as soon as I'm unconscious," he said.

They didn't like the idea even a little bit but they consented grudgingly.

Peckoff, Jennie, and Rand were to inhale the nitrous oxide.

Jennie insisted on undergoing the same experience as the two men.

She and Peckoff sat in two easy chairs while Rand adjusted masks to their faces and set up the equipment to feed the gas slowly to them.

"Here you go," he said, turning on the valve. The gas began to filter into their masks. He watched them inhale it, saw consciousness begin to fade.

He was very much aware of the unreality of the situation. They thought he was mentally unbalanced and they were humoring him. Well, were they right? Was he off the beam?

Hell, he didn't know. Even in his secret heart he wasn't sure he wasn't nuts. That was the trouble with something like this. You couldn't tell whether you were batty or whether the things you thought you experienced were real. But he knew that at least one outstanding figure in American philosophy had given serious thought to the reality of the nitrous oxide experience. The catch was that when you began to investigate ultimate reality all the things you thought were real —matter and space and time—began to slide off into unreality. No less an

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authority that Immanuel Kant had believed that the world outside of us is a projection of our own inward consciousness.

The last investigations of science, Rand knew, must lie in investigating the minds of the scientists themselves. Somewhere deep in his brain, a group of atoms—the atoms that did the thinking—were trying to find out about themselves.

Was this insanity? Was the honest effort of a mind to find out about itself and the world in which it lived, was this insanity?

If it was, then the real scientists, the big men in the field, ought to investigate the insane asylums.

They might find some patient there who could tell them what they wanted to know.

If the human race has crucified its saints, martyred its saviors, it has also all too often locked up its geniuses behind the high walls and the barred gates of some sanitarium.

Or that was what Rand suspected.

Now they were trying to do the same thing to him.

They would do it too.

This experiment would prove nothing. Peckoff probably would not recall the events of the nitrous oxide experience, or if they didn't jibe with his preconceived notions of what they ought to be, then he would deny them.

And Jennie—What would her experience be?

Peckoff and Jennie sat quietly in their chairs. They were unconscious, their minds off exploring in worlds beyond.

He cut down the input of gas to their masks, adjusted the valves so that the proper flow would be maintained. Too much gas and they might not wake up.

Then he laid down on the couch, adjusted his own mask, set the flow at the proper level.

The two attendants watched him suspiciously.

He waved at them.

The sweetish gas flowed into his lungs. He stared at the ceiling. It began to fade, to slip away. The soft clamor of the city at night, the distant far-off honk of a taxicab, the rattle of the elevated trains, all these began to go into silence.

He closed his eyes.

The passage was swift and easy.

It was like two men blending into one man. It was like a trick motion picture where two men meet and become one man. He closed his eyes as John Rand of the twentieth century and opened them as Rand of the Caves.

PEG was busy, Rand saw. She was very busy. She was using a stone knife to remove layers of fat from the inside of a huge bear skin.

"Hah!" Rand thought. "Then Murk didn't get the skin after all."

Murk had been claiming the skin. He had been insisting that his magic had really killed the great cave bear and that the skin was his proper share of the spoils.

What had happened?

For a moment, Rand was confused as scrambled memories and identities of two worlds merged into each other. Rand of the Caves could remember John Rand of the twentieth century only very vaguely. Rand of the twentieth century was a dim ghost in the caveman's mind, something he could never remember quite clearly.

What had happened?

Then the two memories merged and Rand remembered what had happened.

He wasn't sure he liked what he had done. Murk was not one to take a rebuff lightly. Nor would he be inclined

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to relinquish his claim on the bear skin. The hide of so ferocious and so terrible an animal would automatically make its owner a person to be respected by the cave people. The man who owned the skin of a cave bear would, by sympathetic magic, automatically assume some of the terrible strength of that mighty animal.

Or so the superstitious cave men would reason.

Murk would encourage that line of reasoning if he owned the skin.

* * *

Fires were burning brightly in the great cavern where the cave people dwelt. An underground river had hollowed out this cave. A thousand people could find shelter here, though the cave dwellers did not number half this many. During the great snows of the winter, they were snug and warm here in this cave. When the fierce spring storms came, the cave protected them. The entrance was small. They had placed huge boulders around it so it could be quickly closed, thus shutting out the wolves and the great bears who might seek to enter.

The cave protected them, enabled them to increase in numbers. As long as the game remained plentiful, they were safe. Hunger, the ever-present threat of famine, was their only and greatest danger. But as long as there were deer in the forests and fish in the streams, they could meet that danger.

The sound of footsteps sounded near Rand. He looked up.

Murk was approaching.

Rand got to his feet.

"I came for my bear skin," Murk said sullenly.

"*Your* bear skin?"

"It is mine. My magic killed the bear. The skin is rightfully mine and I want it."

Murk looked determined.

Rand laughed. "I told you back on the mountain to try and get it," he answered.

The laugh stung Murk. In all history there was never a witch doctor who could afford to be laughed at. Their stock in trade was always fear.

"You dare to face my magic?" Murk challenged.

Rand was silent. He was Rand of the Caves but he was also John Rand of the twentieth century. The thoughts of John Rand moved like dim ghosts through his mind. The transference from one man to the other was always partial, never complete. The dim memories of John Rand told Rand of the Caves that Murk's magic was nonsense.

He laughed again.

"Do you threaten me with your magic, Witch Doctor?"

"I certainly do," Murk answered. "I will loose my magic against you. I will place the curse of winter on you, so you will always be cold. I will put the curse of summer on you, so your blood will always be hot. I will put the no-game curse on you, so that when you hunt the game will know you are coming and will run away from you."

Peg stopped scraping the bear skin. This was a terrible thing that Murk was threatening.

RAND of the Caves knew it was terrible too. He didn't mind the curse of the winter or the curse of the summer, but the curse of no game—If the hunter could not find game, he starved.

The dim memories of John Rand said the curse of no-game was nonsense too. John Rand was not superstitious. He had no fear of the dark forces of evil. He had a very poor opinion of all witch doctors.

Rand laughed again. Something in-

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side him shivered but something else inside of him laughed..

He was two men. One man was a little scared of this witch doctor. The other man was not afraid. He feared nothing.

"If you put your curses on me, I will break your neck," Rand said. "How would you like a broken neck, Witch Doctor?"

That was the way to deal with a witch doctor!

Rand heard Peg catch her breath Murk looked confused, perplexed. Could it be that Rand of the Caves did not believe in his magic? How was this possible? Everyone else believed in it.

Murk fumbled in the bag of otter skin where he kept his magic tokens. He felt for his necklace of fox teeth, his pebbles of many colors. He began to work his hands.

He would show this rebel what happened to those who flouted his magic.

"Get away from here!" Rand roared.

He started toward Murk. With his hands, he reached for Murk's neck.

Rand stood six feet tall. He weighed more than two hundred pounds. Every pound was bone and muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him.

Murk took one look at the hands reaching for his neck. He suddenly doubted the strength of his magic.

A curse might be very well but Rand had the muscles of a giant.

Murk forgot about his magic. He backed hastily away.

Rand laughed and let him go.

"It is good to see him run," Peg said uncertainly. "But—"

"Do you mean you are afraid of his magic?" Rand growled.

"There is something in me that is afraid of it," Peg answered slowly. "And something that scorns it. It is good to see Murk run, but I am afraid this is not the end. A running witch doctor is a dangerous person."

"I will break every bone in his body," Rand growled.

Within an hour, he knew he would have to make his threat good.

VI

WITHIN an hour, a group of the hunters, led by Eld, the wise old man of the cave people and urged on by Murk, approached Rand's fire.

Rand rose to his feet as they came near. He fingered the stone knife thrust through his belt.

"What is the meaning of this?" he growled.

Murk kept in the background. There were thirty or forty persons in the group, all of them hunters, except Eld, who was too old to hunt.

Eld stood in front of the group. Rand knew him as a fair man. Too old to hunt or to fight, most of the time Eld sat by the fire and thought. The tribe respected him. He was not their chief. They had not yet advanced to the degree of organization where chiefs would be necessary. So Eld was not their chief. But he was an old man, and was respected for his wisdom.

"Murk claims the bear skin," Eld said. He spoke slowly and hesitantly, choosing his words with care. "He says the great bear was killed by his magic and that the skin is his."

Speaking according to his lights, Eld stated the propostion very clearly.

Rand spoke clearly too.

"I say he lies," Rand answered. Murk's magic had nothing to do with killing the bear. The magic that killed the bear was the huge stone that Peg and I dropped on its back. When it fell, it just happened to land on Murk's magic bag."

The group stirred uneasily. They saw the logic of what Rand said. They

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respected him, were a little awed by him. He was a mighty hunter. He brought more deer home than any other hunter. Yes, they saw Rand's logic. But they also saw Murk's claim. After all, the bear had died on the witch doctor's magic bag. That, somehow, made the bag have something to do with the bear's death.

They did not have a clear conception of cause and effect. The grim law of cause and effect had not yet been discovered. To them, effect resulted from unknown causes. To them, effect was often magical.

"That may be," Eld answered. "But—"

He hesitated, groping for the words he wanted to use.

"But what?" Rand answered.

"Murk says that unless you give him the skin, he will put the curse of no-game—"

"On me?" Rand laughed grimly. "Let him do it. I will still bring in more deer than anybody else in the tribe."

"Not on you," Eld answered.

"Not on me?"

"No. On the tribe."

"Why—" Rand's angry words died unuttered on his lips. The curse of no-game on the tribe!; He did not need to see the worried, fearful faces of the hunters to know what that meant. No one in the tribe would find any game.

If the hunters could not find game, the people of the caves would starve.

THAT was what the tribe thought. Whether or not it would actually happen did not matter. They *thought* it would happen. The hunter stalked a deer and the deer saw him and escaped. The hunter had merely been careless. Deer escaped every day. But if the curse of no-game was on the tribe, the hunter would think the deer had escaped because of the course. The hunter would think the escape of the deer had resulted not from his carelessness but from Murk's curse.

Murk, with sly cunning, had picked a weapon against which Rand had no defense. If he put the curse of no-game on Rand, then Rand might have proved him a liar by bringing in game. But if he put it on the tribe, Rand was helpless.

"Murk will put the curse of no-game on the tribe," Eld stated. "Unless we force you to give him the bear skin which he says is already rightfully his."

Murk used others to do his work. He brought the superstitious fears of the many against the strength of the one.

"Give him the bear skin or we will go hungry," one of the hunters urged.

"Give it to Murk or our children will beg for food and we will not be able to give it to them," a second said.

Rand choked on his own words. These were his people, his own people. Even if he had wanted to, he could not fight them.

"For the good of all, give up the bear skin," Eld urged.

Eld was a fair man. That was the damnedest thing about the whole situation. If Eld had been a trickster, then Rand might have defied him. But Eld was a fair man and everyone knew it. If Rand defied him, he only hurt himself.

If Rand refused to give up the bear skin, the whole tribe would be against him.

He glanced sideways at Peg, to see what she thought. She said nothing but the appeal on her face was eloquent.

"We can find another bear skin," she whispered.

Peg knew what it meant to go against the beliefs of the whole tribe.

She was begging Rand not to do it. She might not believe in Murk's curse but other people believed in it. They

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had to live with other people.

Eld and the hunters waited for an answer. Murk had squirmed his way to the front of the group. There was a look of triumph on his wolfish face.

Rand was licked.

He knew what he had to do.

He turned, stooped down, and lifted the heavy skin.

He hurled it into Murk's face.

The skin weighed several hundred pounds. Murk was not expecting to receive it in that way.

It knocked him down.

A titter of laughter ran through the group as Murk, spitting like a cat, scrambled to his feet. The sound of the laughing took all the meat out of the witch doctor's triumph. Even in the moment of victory, Rand had somehow cheated him. He had given the coveted bear skin but he had been knocked to the ground by it.

Rand turned contemptuously away.

The contempt plus the laughter plus the opportunity stung Murk to action.

Jerking the stone knife from his belt, he leaped at Rand's back.

"Look out!" Peg shouted.

RAND guessed rather than saw what was happening. He twisted sideways. The knife struck his left shoulder blade, glanced from the bone, gouged a dripping groove in the flesh as it sliced its way downward.

Rand spun halfway around. His own knife was already out of his belt. Murk, having lost his balance, was clawing at him. The witch doctor struck again with his knife. He aimed at the neck this time.

Rand's upthrust arm warded off the blow.

Starting low, his own knife drove upward. All the strength of his right arm was behind it.

The point went into the soft belly tissues just below the wishbone. It went in so far that the skin of he hand that held the knife met the skin of the stomach.

Murk stopped clawing. He was half hanging on Rand's left shoulder, trying to hold on with one hand and to drive his own knife home with the other. He ceased trying to stab at Rand's neck. His eyes popped wide open. He clung to Rand's shoulder, saying nothing.

Awe-stricken, the group of hunters stared at them.

Murk began to tremble. A conclusive shudder passed through his body. He grabbed at Rand's shoulder with fingers that had suddenly lost their strength.

Rand shrugged him loose.

He fell all sprawled out.

He tried to get up.

His legs twitched convulsively.

Clawing at the ground with hands and feet, he fell forward on his face.

His breathing was convulsive.

He screamed.

And died.

There was silence in the big cavern where the cave people lived.

Eld looked at the dead witch doctor. He shrugged. The hunters looked. They shrugged. A dead witch doctor was a dead witch doctor. Murk had died before he put the curse of no-game on the tribe. He was dead, there would be no curse. He had tried to kill Rand in a treacherous attack and had been himself killed.

That was all there was to it.

A dead witch doctor was just a dead witch doctor. So much carrion to be tossed into the gulch for the wolves.

The echoes of Murk's final scream rang in Rand's ears. And rang and rang. It seemed to come from far away. It did not die out. It grew

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stronger.

It tugged at Rand, tugged at part of him, tugged at something in his mind.

A flowing etheric current picked up part of him.

The John Rand part of him was swept away.

He opened his eyes as John Rand of the twentieth century. He was back in his study. He wasn't lying on his couch. He was standing in the middle of the room and breathing heavily.

The mask had been torn from his face.

The two hospital attendants were sitting on the floor.

One of them was screaming.

VII

RAND was aware of a splitting ache in his back.

In her big chair, he could see Jennie beginning to arouse.

Peckoff had gotten out of his chair. He had fallen down. He was lying all sprawled out in the middle of the floor.

Rand looked at the two hospital attendants. They stared back at him from terror-haunted eyes.

"What's the matter with you?" Rand said in a dazed tone of voice. "What are you so scared about?"

They didn't answer. Sweat was rolling from their faces One of them had begun to develop a tic in his cheek.

In her chair, Jennie moaned and opened her eyes. She pulled the mask from her face. Rand started toward her. He didn't get past Peckoff.

Something about the psychiatrist's position attracted his attention. Peckoff was lying very still.

Rand saw why he was still.

The handle of a knife was protruding from his body.

Rand bent over the man.

He saw that Peckoff was dead.

"What—what happened?" he whispered.

"You—you did it," the attendant answered. "You knifed him."

"I—I—"

Homicide, Rand thought. Maybe it wasn't murder but it was certainly homicide.

"Murk," Rand whispered. "It didn't make any difference when I killed Murk. That was a fair fight."

He was thinking about his fight with Murk. In the world of the caves, a fair fight that ended in death was not a serious matter. That was a rougher and in many ways a fairer world. There weren't any police to ask questions. You killed a man in a fair fight. So what? He had had his chance.

The twentieth century was different. You never knew what the courts would decide was a fair fight. You never knew how much cunning lawyers would pervert the truth. And even if it was a fair fight, it was still homicide. You might fight the charge, if you were lucky, but Rand knew he wasn't lucky. His sanity was in question. That was the catch. Peckoff and Jennie had certainly questioned his sanity. Peckoff's records would be in his office. They would be brought into court.

The lawyers and alienists would have a field day.

Homicide plus the question of insanity meant only one thing: life in the barred ward of an insane asylum. Oh, they wouldn't hang him. They would just lock him up for life.

In many ways, hanging would be preferable.

"John," this was Jennie whispering. She didn't seem to realize that Peckoff was dead. She didn't seem to understand what had happened.

"John—"

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"Yes, dear."

"I—I was Peg."

"What?"

"I was Peg of the Caves. I saw the bear skin, the great cave with all the people. And I saw the fight."

HE SCARCELY heard her. That she should have had the dream was so inconceivable that it staggered the understanding. Somehow it seemed to prove that his dream wasn't a dream.

It was reality.

Now was real.

Was she the reincarnation of Peg of the Caves? Or were Jennie Rand and Peg kindred personalities, with the result that like sought and found like across the bridge of time?

He didn't know. The philosophers, the scientists, and the psychologists would have to answer these questions.

If Jennie was Peg, what about Peckoff? Had he too, shared the same experience?

Rand was aware that he was looking at the knife that had been driven home in Peckoff's body. The handle of that knife held his attention.

The handle was not made of bone as were the handles of the two carving knives he had taken from the kitchen.

The handle of this knife was made of strands of wrapped rawhide.

He pulled the knife out.

It was a flint knife.

It wasn't one of the knives he had taken from the kitchen.

It was made of carefully chipped flint.

It belonged to Rand of the Caves.

He turned the knife over and over in his fingers, ignoring the blood on it. The two attendants stared at him. To them, he was a ghoul fondling a murder weapon.

"The knife of Rand of the Caves!" Rand breathed. "Peckoff was killed by a stone knife that belonged—belongs—to Rand of the Caves."

His shoulder hurt. His left shoulder. It ached. He twisted his head around and looked at it.

There was blood on his shirt, blood from a gash gouged into his left shoulder.

"I think," he said slowly. "I think we have proved something."

"Is—is he dead?" Jennie whispered, nodding toward Peckoff's body.

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"They say—" He nodded toward the two attendants. "They say I killed him."

"Oh."

She, too, knew what this fact meant in the twentieth century. She was silent. Finally she spoke.

"What are we going to do?"

He had been thinking about that. He had reached a decision. There was only one thing he could do. He didn't know whether or not she was willing but he knew what he was going to do.

He first laid down the flint knife, picked up the two steel knives, moved toward the two hospital attendants.

They blanched.

They thought he was going to kill them too.

"I'm going to turn you loose," he said.

He cut their bonds. As they went out the front door they looked like they were surprised to find themselves still alive.

Rand looked at Jennie. Somewhere on the street outside this apartment building the two attendants were already telling their story to a cop. Before many minutes, the sirens would be screaming. The front door would be banging as it was broken down.

Rand took four extra nitrous oxide flasks from his desk. One flask was enough for one person. He fitted the

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rubber feed tubes to the four of them, picked up two masks.

She followed him with her eyes.

"It's the only way for me," he said. "I'll either go to jail or I'll go to an insane asylum if I stay here."

She nodded slowly.

"Do you want to go with me?" he asked.

It was very silent in the study.

There was a smile deep within her eyes.

"I'm willing," she answered.

"There won't be any way back," he warned.

"I don't want to come back," she answered. "I want to go with you."

He fitted the masks to their faces. By the time the sirens began wailing they were already going out.

The sirens were only a dim wailing sound from a far-off world. They never did hear the pounding on the front door.

THE amazed newspapers called it murder and then a suicide pact.

City detectives, finding the stone knife with the three bodies in the study, said that unquestionably it was an Indian relic.

The detectives looked a long time for the two steel knives that the hospital attendants swore Rand had had.

They didn't find those knives.

It was a good story for the newspapers. They played it up for a day, then forgot it. If there had been a mystery connected with the story, they would have played it up for several days. But there was no mystery. It was just a plain killing, then a suicide pact. The participants involved were important, which made it worth playing up for a day, but there wasn't any mystery in it, so it wasn't worth space the second day after it happened.

It was just a splash on page one. Then it wasn't even a ripple.

* * *

Outside the great cave the dawn broke slowly, revealing a riot of glorious colors, pink and rose and pearl, against the sky.

Rand of the Caves sniffed the morning air, spoke to the woman standing beside him.

"It smells good, Jennie," he said.

"It certainly does," she answered. "There's not even a trace of burned gasoline in it anywhere, no coal smoke, no fumes. Just clean sweet air."

They stood in the mouth of the cave, feeling the fineness of the morning.

"I called you Jennie," Rand said. There was a puzzled expression on his face. "Why did I call you Jennie? Your name is Peg."

Dim ghost-like memories moved through his mind.

The same memories moved through her mind.

"Peg or Jennie, it doesn't matter," she answered. "Somehow I think I'm both of them."

The sunlight pouring into the mouth of the cave glinted on the two knives he was fingering.

In the light of the sun the blades of the knives glittered like fire.

WATCH FOR:—

"THE SECRET OF ELEANA'S TOMB"

By CARL TANZLER VON COSEL

IN THE MAY FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

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ROMANCE of the ELEMENTS

WHILE SEARCHING FOR A NEW ELECTRIC LAMP FILAMENT, WILLIAM VON BOLTON, IN 1903, ISOLATED FINELY DIVIDED METALLIC TANTALUM, ROLLED IT, MOLDED IT SUCCESSFULLY INTO FILAMENT STRIPS THAT WERE USED UNTIL DISPLACED BY TUNGSTEN.

SO TANTALIZING WAS THE SEARCH FOR A STRANGE NEW SUBSTANCE IN CERTAIN FINNISH ORE, THAT SWEDISH ANDERS EKEBERG CALLED IT "TANTALUM." THIS WAS IN 1802. UNTIL 1846, HOWEVER, MOST SCIENTISTS BELIEVED THAT TANTALUM WAS JUST ANOTHER NAME FOR THE ELEMENT COLUMBIUM.

IN THE 1920'S TANTALUM IN TRICKLE CHARGERS AND "B" BATTERY ELIMINATORS MADE POSSIBLE HOME RECEPTION WITH PIONEER RADIOS. SHEETS OF TANTALUM WERE FIRST COMMERCIALLY PRODUCED IN 1922 BY DR. BALKE OF FANSTEEL.

BECAUSE METALLIC TANTALUM RESISTS RUST, IT FOUND EARLY USE IN CRUCIBLES AND STANDARD WEIGHTS, FOR SURGICAL AND DENTAL INSTRUMENTS. WORLD WAR II SURGEONS USED TANTALUM PLATES TO REPAIR SKULLS; TANTALUM FRAMEWORK ON WHICH TO FABRICATE PLASTIC EARS; TANTALUM WIRE AND FOIL TO SUTURE NERVES.

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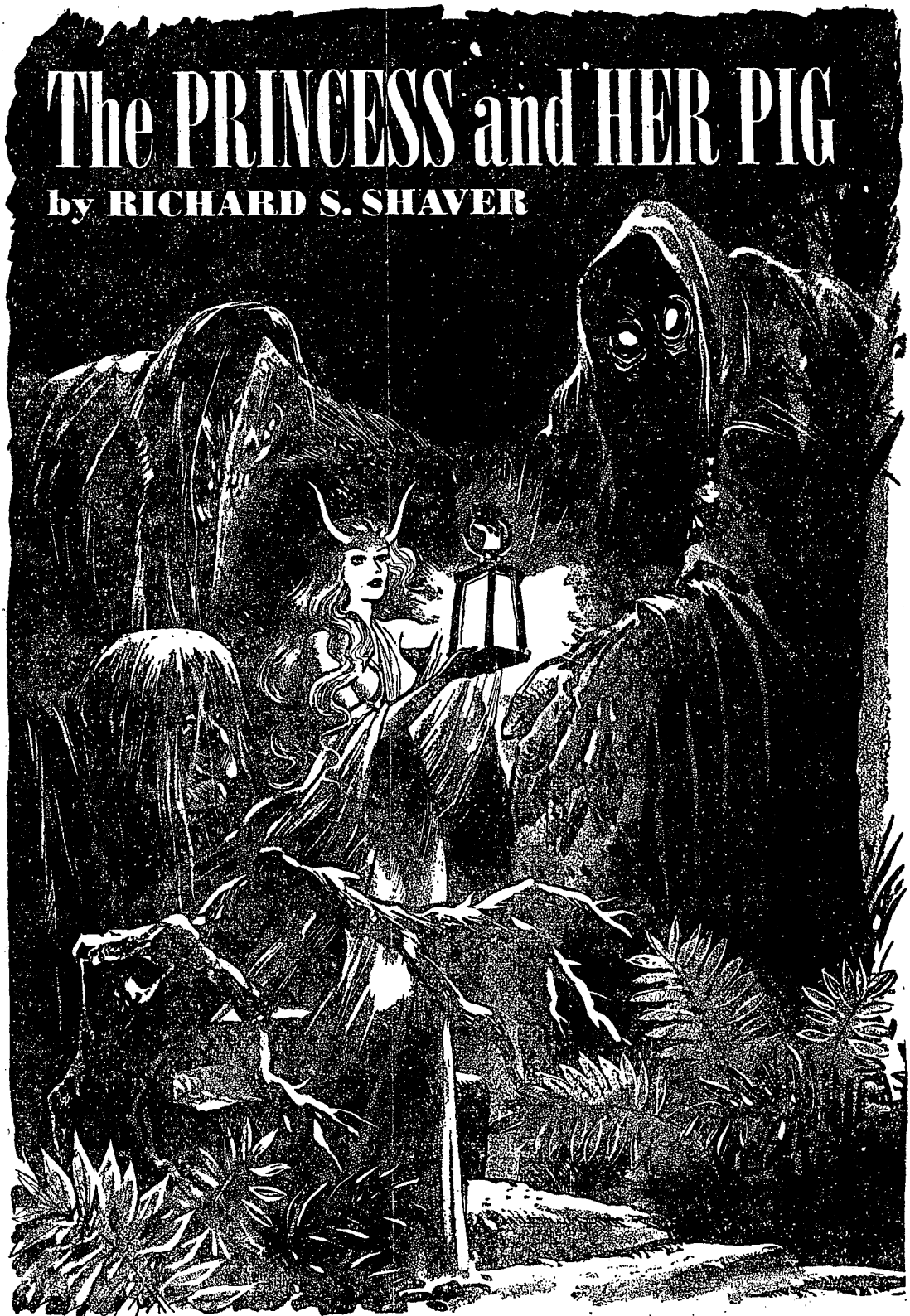
The PRINCESS and HER PIG

by RICHARD S. SHAVER



The prince found himself looking at a horned woman of very strange beauty, and she was smiling

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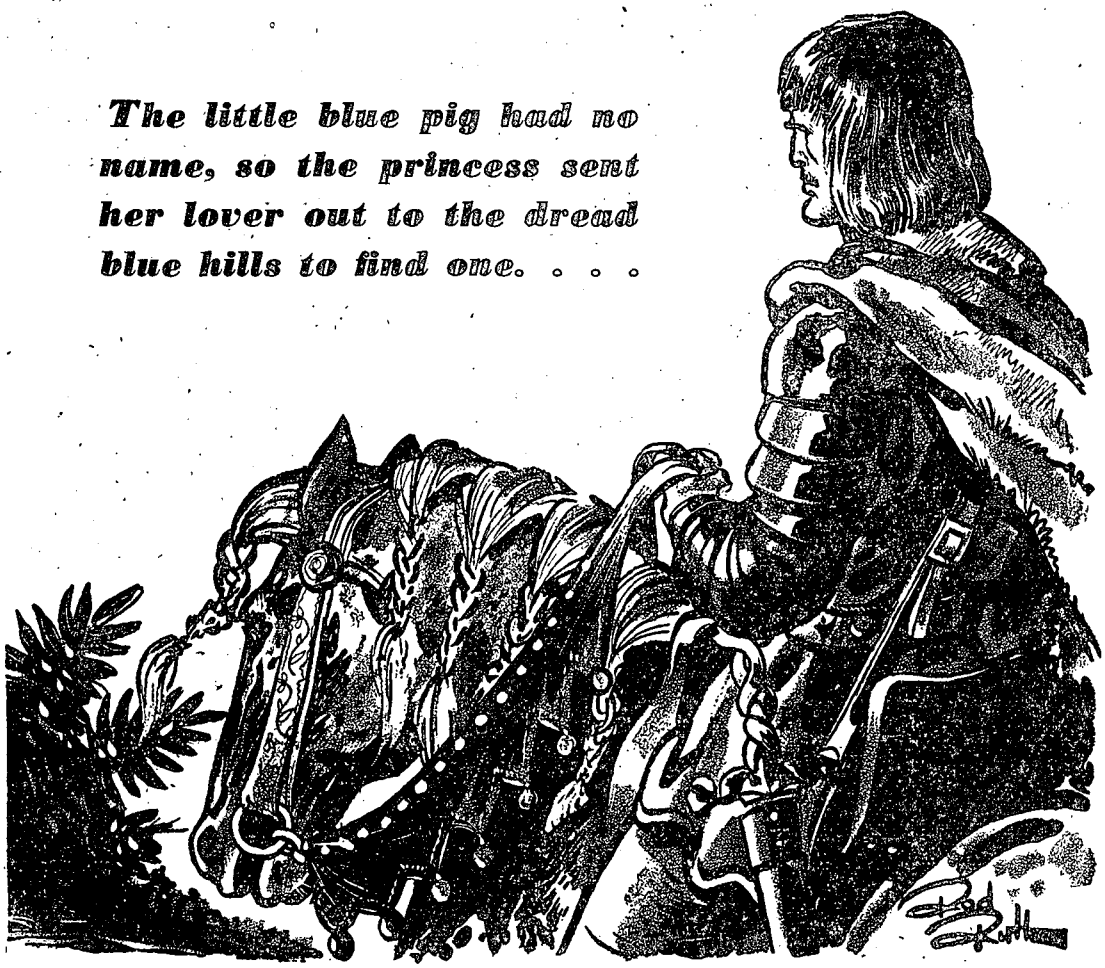
THE name of the pig was a secret. The princess wouldn't tell anyone, not even her dearest freinds, the name of the little blue pig. So everyone in the court just had to call it "the little blue pig," and what else under their breath I never heard. You see, the princess was very fond of the little porker, and to make love to the princess, to talk with the princess, to come anywhere near the beautiful daughter of the so rich king—meant to kiss the little blue pig on his confounded pink snout. And even the most courteous courtiers were apt to be seen casting a contemplative eye — a very contemplative eye—upon the little blue pig. And the pig stuck his curly tail in the air, stuck his pink little snout in the air —stuck his round little hams in the air and scampered gaily about the palace, rooting in everybody's bedrooms, tearing up the prime minister's best shirts —tracking muddy feet over the councillor's counterpanes, rooting in the royal chamberlain's private pantry, and making of himself a very royal nuisance.

But the princess thought the little blue pig was the most wonderful little animal that had ever existed, the most charming pet that any princess ever had, and altogether a perfect ornament to the life of the court. And, of course, everyone agreed with her. At least, they all agreed out loud. And the pig, either

The little blue pig had no name, so the princess sent her lover out to the dread blue hills to find one. . . .



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because he was a very smart young porker, or a very lucky young porker never bothered the king. He never, never went anywhere near the royal bedchamber, and never, never was he where the king happened to be. So the round little, blue little, piggish little, rooting little bundle of four legged mischief and general focus of disapproval went his rooting rounds rejoicing in a freedom unrestrained. Unrestrained, that is, except by a pink, or sometimes a golden ribbon about the part of a pig where a neck ought to be.

Now one day there came to court a young prince from a neighboring kingdom. In those days, when royalty took the trouble to go as far as a neighboring court, why royalty meant business of some kind or another. In this case the business meant alliance through marriage—and the young prince was acting as his own ambassador. He wanted to see for himself before things went too far just what sort of princess his royal papa was picking out for him to look at the rest of his life.

NOW the prince also had a pet. A large, red animal of undetermined species — looking midway between a dog and an ape — with all the bad habits of both and but one virtue—a doglike devotion to the prince. When the prince, after the usual circumlocutory ceremonies had been exhaustively attended to, came at last to meet the princess, his dog-ape was hunching along at his heels. And of course, the princess was cuddling the little blue pig, which, with a great golden bow over one ear was looking just as piggish as ever. The princess, as usual, held up his royal little pigginess for the much undesired kiss upon the pink snout.

Now whether the prince was forewarned, as I suspect, or whether his wits were nimbler than most, I cannot say—but he voided the pig-kissing ceremony in this wise: Catching his pet by the scruff of the neck, he said:

"Let's see if our pets do agree—mayhap there will be an omen in it!" And with these words he up with his dog-ape and thrust the muzzle against the surprised snout of the little blue pig. The ape—who, as I have said, held little love for anything in this world beyond the prince, his master, did promptly and thoroughly shred the velvety blue ear of the pampered porker into tattered scarlet ribbons with his long and gleaming fangs. The prince, through this occurrence, had become the great good friend and benefactor of everyone in the court except the princess, who took no pains to hide her displeasure. Murmuring some unintelligible remarks she withdrew to her quarters and summoned the court physician to dress the ear of the at last unfortunate little pig. And many were the glances of thankful hallelujah exchanged in the long suffering court. At last, at long last, the little blue pig had met with a reversal of his usual luck, and what omen there was in it, we shall see.

Now, not long after this, the prince decided that, insofar as looks were concerned, the princess was utterly to the mustard, and there was not much use in looking further for his heart's desire. So he formally presented his suit to her royal sire, setting forth in ambassadorial jargon the tremendous advantages of an alliance of the two royal houses, lying adjacent as they did, their lands bordering for leagues, and so on in a long and tiresome speech, to which the king did have to assent to put an end to the phrase making. So we come to the prince and the princess in the garden, and the little blue pig rooting along in the rear. The prince's pet had been confined to the royal kennels.

The princess was talking:

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"Well, my father may have given his consent, and you may think all it arranged just as you wish, but I certainly am not going to be rushed off to the altar in any such high handed and unromantic fashion. I have only just met you, I don't even know you, and what's more to the point, I'm not at all sure I like you!"

The prince was used to emergencies, and just as used to getting his own way as the princess. "Ah, my princess, you do misunderstand and underrate my motives. Why, I chose your portrait from among a hundred because I fell in love with your face at once—and now you find it unromantic of me to strive to hasten our marriage! Believe me, my love is as true as—" and he would have added much more in the same vein as to the quality of his love but the princess happened to look at her dear little pig, whose mangled ear hung down over his eye, and she said:

"Your love should be true, it is so very young it has had no time to be otherwise. But how do I know it even exists? What proof of your devotion are you prepared to offer? It's customary to slay a dragon—or at least unhorse a few worthy foemen in the tournament as some proof of the courage love bestows upon you."

THE prince was not sure whether she mocked him or no, but he was feeling uncomfortable. Still she was a most attractive princess — and words had never failed him — up to now. He thoughtfully kicked the little blue pig, who seemed intent upon getting between his feet as they walked, and made answer as the princess picked up the adored roundness.

"Well, the dragons have been very scarce of late—I've only had contact with them by hearsay—and as for tournaments; the economies the kings of these parts have been exercising leave little in the budget for such luxuries. But I'll take thought upon the matter, and do you likewise—I'm sure something can be found to prove my love."

Now the garden in which they walked was walled and trellised with flowering vines of many kinds that drooped long tendrils of fragrant petals over the paths. The flower trees blossomed right and left—even the grass bore little blue blossoms on the tips of the blades—birds warbled and flitted in flashing brilliance of prismatic featherings from shrub to sweetly odorous shrub: all was beauty and much care was lavished to make it so. The garden of the palace was a most fit place for love to flourish and grow into luxuriant bloom—but the heart of the prince was troubled, for he thought upon seeing her that loving and wedding would follow swift upon his meeting, but now she proved most willful—he was not certain what she was, a clever girl who was wise enough to see his worth and to make him see hers, or a fickle jade of ill nature who thought only of herself. He was most attracted to her—but his thoughts were suddenly interrupted—the princess had set down the little pig—who had immediately ran between his feet— and the prince stretched his length upon the flowered grass in undignified suddenness. The princess laughed merrily, and his princeliness felt more uncomfortable. He could think of nothing to say, and as he sat up, his eye bestowed upon the little pig a glance more eloquent than a six page letter. They resumed their walk, the princess chatting gaily and ignoring the incident as though it had not happened—but the prince, for perhaps the first time in his life, was so entirely ill at ease he could only pace in silence and pretend a dignity that felt ridiculous.

The sun came up the next day and

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shone around—various birds bestirred themselves to pursue the late worms into their very bed-chambers, the morning glories unfolded, the light got so bright the prince could not sleep, and he got up. As he felt very low he put on his best white doeskin boots, and a purple doublet much beslashed with a patterned fabric showing golden green through the slashes. Thus clad, he postured before the mirror until his appreciation of his appearance had puffed up his low morning estimate of his personal stock to a loftier point, then he strode manfully out to sniff the morning breeze.

As he went down the still darkened corridor of the ancient castle, he stumbled over the little pig! He caught himself by grasping a hanging tapestry. As the little pest gathered his pointed hooves together to scamper away, a white deerskin boot caught him fair on his round hams and he flew squealing through the air as a pigskin should, in a parabola, end over end, down the short flight of stairs that lay ahead. The prince's day had begun perfectly.

"I can't remember when I've enjoyed kicking anything so much!" mused the prince as he strode down the garden paths, hung with the great trumpet blossoms dripping scented dew, and bordered with the blue flowered grass, toward the stables to see to his horses. He might need the mounts, he figured, if this princess did succeed in scaring up a dragon or some such business. The way of a prince was not a bed of roses, in these days, since it had gotten to be the custom to butcher some chimera or other as a prelude to any love making or marriage.

THE princess arose at noon. Even then, the princesses were late sleepers. And this one had lain awake half the night, cudgeling her wits for some task or other to set the prince that would really prove whether or no he set any great store by her. At first she had disliked his bearing, he seemed too proud and reserved to ever be friends with anyone. But since the little blue pig had tripped him up, and all his princely dignity had spilled itself upon the grass, she had discovered a softening in her when she thought of him.

Now as we know, the name of the little blue pig was a secret. It really had a name, but when she had been asked, she told everyone it was a secret. The court, this being the age of superstition, had surmised that it was a magical secret, and had made much of the mysterious unknown name of the pig. The existence of this superstition was known to her, and as she lay pondering, the name of a certain much feared mountain home of wizardry, a place where men feared to go because of tales that were told of it, came to her. And as she thought of this place, she smiled, for she took no stock in sorcery or mummery of any common kind, she being not unwise, and fell asleep with the smile still upon her face. She was still wearing the smile when she met the prince the next day.

It was a very bright day, as the prince had noticed, and it seemed to get a great deal brighter when she came toward him, her hair bringing the sun very close to the eyes, so that he blinked. The smile might account for the dazzlement to some extent, but still he could not remember being dazzled just that much before. She was a very fine princess, to be sure!

"And have you decided," said the prince as he bent and kissed her hand, "what it is that I must do to prove my love?"

"I have thought of something that will test you in more ways than one," she did make answer. "And yet it is a

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simple thing, too. A very simple thing, but you may find it too much trouble."

"Ah, what can it be you have hit upon—so great in testing, and yet so simple in doing?" The prince smiled, for he thought it seemed that he was to get off easily.

"All you have to do—" the princess said, "is to find out the name of my little blue pig."

The prince was puzzled. "Well, what is the name of the little blue pig?"

"I never told anyone," she was laughing at him.

"How in the name of thunder am I to find out the name if you won't tell me?" He laughed too, thinking that all his difficulties were clearing up.

She stopped laughing.

"There is a place in the blue hills," she said, "and it is told that if any man desires to know the answer to fate—or any question—he can learn all that he wishes to know there—but men are afraid and do not go. As long as it seems I must marry you—why, I will after you have come back from that place in the blue hills with my pig's name and what other answers to life's problems you may wish. I have always wanted to go there and see what is the mystery about. Since I cannot, you'll go for me, and prove yourself worthy of me."

"How," asked the prince, "how is the placed named, that I may find it? How am I to know where my questions are to be answered—what mystery is there in the thing anyway? Of what are men afeared?"

HER voice lowered, and the love of faroff things crept into the sound of it, hanging odd little glistenings upon her breaking b r e a t h—thrilling the prince with her own desire for far questing which she could not indulge, being woman.

"The place is called 'The Vale of the Wizards'—just where it lies in those far mountains called the blue hills I know not, except the way lies due north from here. As for mystery, there's so much fear about the place that no one's been there for several life-times.—But the tale is that a brave man can acquire all knowledge by seeking for it there. So if you love me, as you say, you'll buy the secret of my little pig's name with your courage and bring it back to me. What else you bring is up to you. My love awaits the proof of yours."

"I've a l w a y s heard"—the prince mused, gazing at her face, sincere now, and yet provocative and lovely. "I've always heard that it was most unhealthy to traffic with wizardry in any form. But if you so desire it for a wedding gift, I'll bring you proof that I have been there, and if the tale is true. I'll bring the name, and you will know I've solved the mystery. I'll bring the blue pig's name and mayhap a blue wizard, too.

She put out her hand, and the prince noted intimately it's soft contour for the first time as he pressed it to his lips and clasped the bargain. He must be most unobservant, he did muse, not to have seen before how beautiful a hand could be.

Not many days had passed, but much distance swiftly beneath a good mount's steady ambling feet, and the questing prince was drawing into the high country of the hazy hills. Dwellings had grown fewer and fewer, faces farther apart, and to all questions as to the Vale of the Wizards only a northerly pointing finger and a warning "But no one goes that way!"

To which the prince, not pausing for whys or wherefores—always shouted over his shoulder, "Well, I go that way!"

Just why he hastened he could not

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say, time seemed to press him on and he was not unwilling. The way was not unpleasant to the eyes, and the hills seemed beckoning him to some secret's answer of a strange attraction.. In his ears soft rang the princess' voice; "And the tale is that a brave man can acquire all knowledge by seeking there."

THE prince was not one to dwell on why he did as he did. The air was good to his nostrils, the land rolled down from above in wooded reaches of a beauty he could not remember having felt about him heretofore; before him was a strange thing to learn about and curiosity drew him, whetting his desire for adventure, nurtured in those days by tales of magical happenings that truly happened. Fear there was too, but youth and fear have little in common; the fear was uncomfortable and kept itself well hidden. "The Vale of The Wizards." The sounds of the young princess' voice rolled around his head softly as he thought upon her with the sun glinting from the tendrils of her hair—her eyes aglow with dreams of faroff mystery—"The Vale of the Wizards."

* * *

Night was stealing the light from the sky and hiding it under her purple cloak, where it shone through small occasional openings like great floating eyes, and like little ferret eyes, and like the eyes of blinking bugs. Still the prince rode on, untired. The night's laving breeze caressed his face refreshingly with manly little scents of tiny blossoms not far off, and leafy scents of trees, and the breathing scent of earth sinking into sleep. The night was pleasant, but still the horse had pushed a hard pace all day, and he'd soon have to find somewhere to pass the night.

* * *

So the weary horse was drooping at the front of a dimlit dwelling of odd shape not long after and the prince was thundering his request for hospitality upon the door. From far down a long corridor he saw through a slit a light approach waveringly. Beneath the light was a pair of gently curving horns above a woman's face. A fair face it was as it neared, green eyes alight above a mouth of bitter, twisted wisdom. The wicket was drawn open and he was face to face with a horned woman of a beauty very strange and her voice was seeking reason for being there and what he sought. Now the prince, as we have noted, was sometimes apt to be confused by untoward occurrences, and the first words he said were:

"Why, in truth, I seek the name of a certain blue pig." His wits having failed to find any other words to toss upon his tongue.

A slow smile spread upon that bitter beauty, like sun upon snow. "And have you nought but jest to offer to explain your presence here? Such as you have not seen in these parts since," she paused, "well, for a long time, now! Do you know where you are?"

The prince saw that his young confusion had amused her, as one easily amused who yet had not smiled for long, for much too long, and so confusion left him.

"Well, no, I know only that I am enhungered, somewhat chilled, and very pleased to see so fair a face. My horse is tuckered, she needs a softer bed than these rocks hereabout afford. She's used to better quarters than she's had of late."

THE prince leaned back in the carven seat and twisted the great horn of mead slowly in his hand. Strange viands, he mused reminiscently, reple-

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tion running over odd, delicious memories of tastes that were new, but then he had been famished. But now, this mead, that topped the uttermost desire his emptiness had visioned! Honey, with an oddly bitter taste, mead a king would go to war to keep from losing. And over the rim of the mead horn he saw the smile of his fair host. Strange fashion, he thought, when people took to growing horns 'twas too much of obeisance to the strict dictates of custom. Local custom, he was saying to himself as he inverted the great cup into his face with deep, pleasant gurgles, "It must be a local custom and who am I to question custom?" But the fear that had been in him was not asleep at all and not so hidden as it had been.

"You were saying," said the prince, a little thickly, "it had been so long since anyone had passed you were not sure there was anyone to pass?" And he looked at her eyes, which was not a wise thing to do, he knew; they were like the mead, too potent for over much tasting.

"How is it so few come this way—the land has a healthy look about it?" Those potent eyes were enigmatic as a cat's, but none the less potent.

"Why, the Vale of the Wizards lies just below here—and no one goes there any more—except of course, the wizards."

"I've heard me somewhat of this Vale—what is there to it, anyway, that men are so afeared, and yet say that all wisdom is to be gained by going there and asking."

Her answer was slow, the words sweet toned—"Why, the wizards do test all aspirants to knowledge. And some do not survive the testing. That is all." Her eyes were searching his face; he felt their looking run through him.

"Perhaps, for a little knowledge, the testing might not be so great?" he asked.

She laughed—"They are not wont to bargain. Their testing is a ritual of vast import and much magic—one is brave—or one perishes."

"How know you of these things?"

She smiled, and shook her head. He felt a fool for asking, it seemed that all wisdom lay on her face. "Well, let it rest. I'm full of music could I sing?"

The Prince had filled the mead horn once too often, to feel like singing. But the strange one of the lovely, bitter face did forestall this ill-advised impulse by offering to sing herself, and so she did.

And music was her singing, wrought of doings that filled and muddled the prince's head with vaulting ambitions, desires to delve into the depths of many color mystery, to quest in far places for all the weird knowledge that is denied to ordinary man, a bewitchment wove itself about him, so that all the desired beauty of yesterday became as dust, and new desires of unimagined splendor rose within him as a welling fountain from new shattered rock. His being became a roaring torrent of reaching hands that sought to grasp the mysteries of life, that sought—and seemed about to find—an answer to life's why—an answer of blasting power!

Then that voice ceased, and she lay down the sounding strings, and slowly he came shuddering back to earth and life again. But he was not the same, nor ever would be what he was when he rode up to that place.

"I see now what it is men look for in the Vale of the Wizards," said the prince, to which the horned woman made no reply but only looked upon him musingly as one who knew his thoughts so well there was no need for

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words.

Now the prince was weary. He rose from the board and stretched and went to the fire and lay down upon a near great couch. And the woman came to him and looked down upon him and bent and passed her hand coolly across his heated face and he fell into a deep slumber. In his sleep was a dream.

It seemed:

THAT next morning had come and that he had arisen and rode forth on his quest. He rode between two great shafts of rock and saw below him a wooded vale of dark trees and slow mists swirling. Those trees were ancient trees, he felt the wisdom that was in them, and that mist that whirled and wound among them was awesomely like thoughts of fear a-wheeling in his head. A voice was saying: "The vale of the wizards," but there was nobody to attend the voice. His horse picked a careful way down the slope, stepping high and gingerly as though she were at a ford and felt cold water and round rocks underfoot.

The vistas of a forest opened then before him, between the mighty boles great ways led down and ever down —leaf sprays and layers of rising morning mist spread waving hands with endless fingers—pale blossoms floated here and there upon green tendrils running thinly out of sight—great pale blossoms of soft transparent texture like dead loves or lost memories. Faces showed for an instant and then vanished if he looked square at them, so that he was not sure whether or not he had seen any faces or only imagined faces of long ago friends.

Now as he rode slowly on, the light grew less and less, more like a swimming liquid than good daylight, and the great boles of the trees were larger by each one as he progressed, great, mighty trees of some forgotten ancient time. The floating blossoms hung more often near him, wide soft pedals softly touching him till finally one fastened at his throat and did remain there, sweetly caressing him with lowly fanning petals, like some monster butterfly or like some dear lost dream of love that had flown into this form and came to life. The flower seemed to grow and peer at him curiously and questioningly as some innocent child's face would peer that had never seen any being before. Still the great petals waved and grew before his eyes. He could see nothing but their slow pulsing, their shimmering, mesmeric beauty, their soft living questioning as of a soul inquiring—"where is life?" Then it came to him that the flower was at heart a face, a woman's face, and even as he realized this, the flower put out two soft hands upon his neck and drew itself to him smiling and he felt strange pain that was yet pleasure and a bleeding that was life pouring out of him. Before his eyes the slow waving wing petals grew less pale, and rosy little veins did show beautifully all through their filmy fabric. And in spite of him he could not will any other thing than this soft bleeding into that growing flower, while the whole wild wood swam eerily about him, and his soul dreamt . . .

NOW time seemed to flow swiftly by him, for he was some other place—and then a waking came to him and he was on a moss bank, the night breathing softly about him. About him were the great trees, their being enhanced by the breathing black of night time so that they were entities of wisdom, talking slowly back and forth among themselves. He listened to those felt words which were thought and slowly as the night breathed through him so did wis-

(Continued on page 168)

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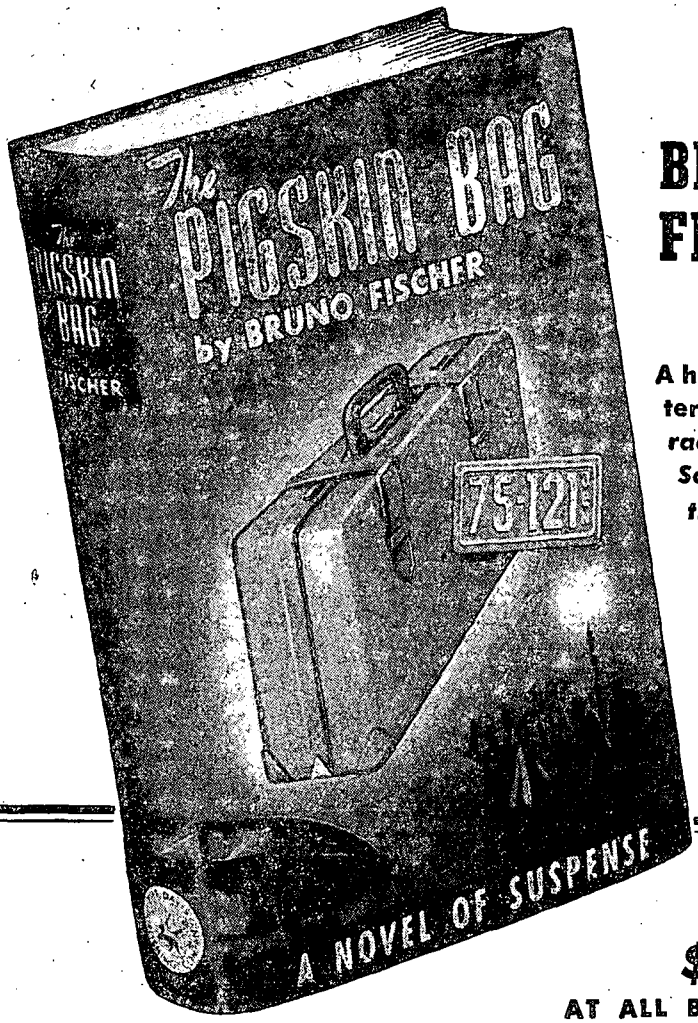

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(Continued from page 166)

dom pour into him, seeming to take the place of that blood that had gone from him into the floating flower's luring face.

Thus is the acquiring of wisdom, he thought to himself—wisdom that is not words, or pictured or anything but a wise fluid flowing through one, a fluid nourishing the soul with secrets, and a bleeding that is sorrowing after beauty.

Now as he lay on that scented darkness, a light came to him slowly from far away. He watched it waving toward him. Gently weaving little curling flames it was, that turned into hair upon the fair head of a woman. And she smiled upon him, and the light was strong, and she had horns, and deep eyes of the green of the sea. And the prince said:

"Who are you?" And his own voice was strange to him.

And she answered slowly, as one who has all time asleep within her bosom.

"I am wisdom—woman wisdom."

And the prince, speaking as though in sleep, with no will but only wonder, heard himself say: "Wisdom has been flowing into me from these trees as I lay here in this dream. I too am wisdom. But, being wisdom, I am still myself, and know not you or anything of you except that I desire you. How is that?"

And the woman made answer in that slow voice that wondered at it's own beautiful sounding. "Wisdom is not something you wear in your hat like a feather, my friend. Wisdom is a power that comes and dwells in you."

Saying these words she bent down and kissed his forehead and the light went out. Again all was darkness blacker than before, but softer. And the woman was not anywhere, the prince knew. And as he rose the Prince was wise and said:

"I am grateful for the beauty I have seen—beauty is gratitude alive. I am grateful for wisdom—and for the pain that lies in wisdom."

SO HE went from that place and after not long he awoke to look into the witch woman's eyes. And around him the great room shimmered in antique unreality of hanging weapons and great figured cloths and strange smoke wraiths that drifted and hung like disappearing familiars who were loath to leave the warmth. And as he looked at those wise and bitter eyes the prince was thinking:

"I know not if I wish to go or stay

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933.

Of Fantastic Adventures, Published Bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1946.

State of Illinois, County of Cook, ss. Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. T. Pullen, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Fantastic Adventures and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, W. B. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Editor, R. A. Palmer, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Managing Editor, H. Browne, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Business Manager, A. T. Pullen, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. 2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; A. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; W. B. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; S. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Wm. B. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; B. G. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. 5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is_____ (This information is required from daily publications only.) A. T. PULLEN, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1946. [SEAL.] DORIS PALOWSKY. (My commission expires April 25, 1949.)

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—and the pig's name is Ingratitude."

But she would have him go, and after clumsily expressing his gratitude to those eyes, the prince was jingling back upon the way again. His wisdom sat lightly on his youth and gave him much joy in observed miracles of growth and wonder all about him. The seeing of much magic where all had been dull mystery before was pleasant and he sang. The way back was shorter by a half than the coming had been. . . .

Once again the princess came to meet him through the morning, and the sun was dazzling on her hair. The prince blinked, and for an instant did see quaintly curving horns upon her head, but this passed and she was a simple girl again. He was very much at ease, and she was a fine princess to be sure.

IMMORTAL DREAM

★ By JON BARRY ★

ALL of us live two lives, one when we are awake and one when we are asleep. Sometimes the things we see and do as part of the dream life are more wonderful than those of our "natural" life. No better example can be afforded of this, than the curious story of how an immortal poem came to be written in a dream.

The dreamer was the gifted English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The story is told that one night, under the influence of a mild dose of opium, Coleridge dreamed a whole poem, apparently brought to mind by the name "Khan Kubla" which he had read just before going to sleep. He tells that in the unfolding of the dream, the words of the poem rose before him as things, and that several hundred lines had appeared before he awoke.

Frantically, he strove to set down the words of the poem before they would be forgotten. He had finished about one fifth of the dream poem, when he was interrupted by the advent of a visitor. A man carrying an umbrella had come from a neighboring town to see him on a matter of business.

Coleridge dispensed with the man as quickly as possible and picked up his pen again. But the words had vanished. The link between his sleeping and waking lives had been broken. In vain, he strove to recall the remaining lines of the poem. It was never finished. But the fragment which he did set down before the interruption still exists as the immortal "Kubla Kahn."

"For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise."

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READER'S PAGE

PAGING MR. WILCOX

Sirs:

"Shadow Of The Sphinx," by William Lawrence Hamling was the best story of a lost race that I've read in many a moon. The character of Zaleikka was done to perfection, and the illustrations by St. John (and cover) were very good. This type of yarn we have all too few of nowadays.

"The Counterfeiter," and "Happiness Is Nowhere," took second place. Both were good, especially the Geier novelette. The illustrations weren't so hot, though.

The other stories were fair, with the glaring exception of "The Red Door," by Don Wilcox. Despite the great number of fans who like him—I hate Wilcox! His yarns are nothing but overgrown fairy-tales. (For instance, his "The Land Of The Big Blue Apples. Ugh. . . .)

By the way, what happened to the reader's page? Please don't discontinue it.

Lin Carter,
865 20th Ave. S.,
St. Petersburg 6, Florida.

Your comments on Don Wilcox are interesting—but as you admit, Don has a great number of fans. No doubt some of his supporters will take issue with you. . . . And incidentally, what's wrong with a fairy-tale, as you call Don's stories. Isn't a fairy tale a fantastic adventure?

Also, your comment on the illustrations for Geier's and Bob Williams' stories is interesting, inasmuch as most readers thought they were two of the best we've used. . . .

As to the reader's page, the printing difficulties during the past few months necessitated dropping the page for two issues. But from now on you'll find it in every issue.....Ed.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Sirs:

"Shadow Of The Sphinx," in the November issue of FA was very good. It is the best of Hamling's work so far. The story brought back memories of the good old days. It reminded me of "Mystery Of The Lost Race," one of your best stories ever to appear in FA. The best, needless to say, was "When Free Men Shall Stand."

When are we going to have another novel by Hamling?

James W. Ayers,
609 1st St.,
Atalla, Alabama.

Mr. Hamling is now Associate Editor of your favorite magazine, and doesn't have too much time for writing at the present time. But we still have some of his stories waiting publication...Ed.

A MEDAL FOR GEIER

Sirs:

After reading the September issue of FA, I have come to the conclusion that Chester S. Geier's "Minions Of The Tiger," is the most intriguing, absorbing, and fascinating story I have ever had the pleasure of reading in your magazine. Geier deserves a medal for this story. Three cheers for him—and keep 'em coming!

Why don't you devote more space to the Reader's Page? That is one of your most interesting features.

Micky Nicholson,
511 W. Council St.,
Salisbury, N. C.

Glad to hear you like Chet's stories so well. And you'll note that Geier has another novel length story in this issue. Let's hear from you on his newest yarn. We'll bet "Forever Is Too Long," rings a bell with you too.....Ed.

HE WANTS A MONTHLY

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the September issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and I think it's dynamic! I'm only twelve years old, but I've read FA and *Amazing Stories* for two years and believe me, I think you're tops!

Geier's "Minions Of The Tiger," was superb. Let's have more like it.

"Taming Of The Tyrant," rates second best, with "A Voice From Beyond," ranking a close third. Finlay's illustration for "Taming Of The Tyrant," was swell. Let's have more of him too!

Please, when are you going monthly?

Michael Kinsman,
1270 Regent Road,
Apartment 16,
Town of Mt. Royal,
Montreal, Quebec,
Canada.

Thanks a lot, Mike, and we'll be going monthly as soon as the paper is available.....Ed.

A NEW FAVORITE

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the January issue of FA, and I want to say that you are starting off 1947 with a bang. I enjoyed Wilcox's story, "Princess Of The Sea," very much, of course—since Wilcox can always be depended upon to turn out a fine story. But what I want to call special at-

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tention to was the story by Charles F. Myers, "I'll Dream Of You."

This story really did something to me. I don't know when I've been intrigued more by a character than Mr. Myers' "Toffee." I want to go on record as saying that you've turned up the "find" of the year and I'm looking forward to seeing many more Toffee stories in coming issues. (Don't let me down now—I noticed you mentioned a sequel in your editorial. I'm anxiously awaiting it—and all to follow!)

John Sauer,
4809 N. Fairfield,
Chicago, Ill.

Thanks, Johnny, we're mighty glad you liked the first Toffee story so well. And, as promised, the second story in what we hope will be a long series, is in this issue. Let's hear from you after you read this one. . . . Oh, yes, we agree wholeheartedly that Mr. Myers is the "find" of the year. And we also think he'll keep on proving it.....Ed.

PAGING MR. PHILLIPS

Sirs:

In reading "Dual Personality," by Rog Phillips in the September FA I noticed one thing: After Dr. Schwick had put Jimmy into the fourth "sleep," he said in a normal tone of voice: "I am always thirsty when I go through this . . ." etc. The important thing in hypnotizing is to always speak in the same tone while the person is under your influence, and under no circumstances to start joking before the patient is awakened. No wonder Jimmy raved for three weeks afterward!

D. T. Grant,
P. O. Box 14,
Lewiston, Idaho.

Rog Phillips points out that when Dr. Schwick put Jimmy into the fourth sleep, Jimmy's will (soul) was completely free of his body and in no way controlled by the Doctor. The control had been established in the "third" sleep.....Ed.

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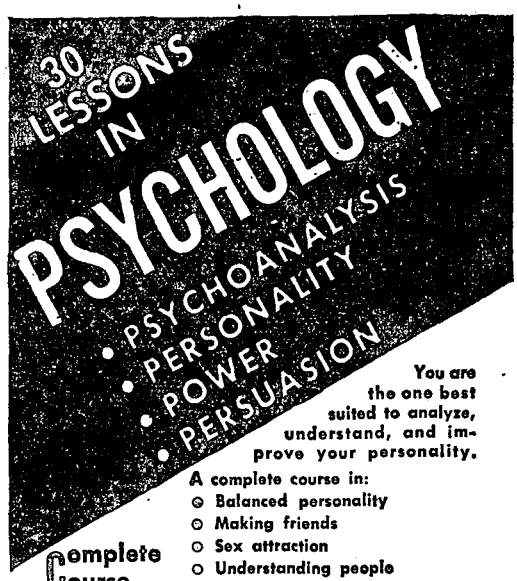

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THE ELECTRON ★ MICROSCOPE ★

By JERRY WALSH

NOT so many days ago, orthodoxy beetled its brow at the proposition that molecules might some day be photographed, and perhaps even atoms. That dream has already partly come true, but not through blind pedantry, or the worship of yesterday's knowledge.

Rather large molecules, like those which constitute the viruses, have already been photographed —but of course it is sheer folly to dream that not so far in the future the atom may be photographed. Or is it?

When Loewenhoek, back in the seventeenth century, discovered that there were teeming myriads of beings in a cup of water, he laid the groundwork for many, many advances of science. But Loewenhoek was satisfied with slipping off his wooden shoes and marveling at the micro-organic world—he was only a lens-grinder, anyway. He had his own version of the germ-theory long before the mighty men of medicine "discovered" it.

Two centuries later the world resounded with the tremendous achievements of Pasteur. It required a Pasteur to draw pictures for the backward biological sciences. Pasteur seldom made statements, or gave opinions, which he was not able to ramify, whether before or after the voicing. It has been said that Pasteur's intuitive opinionations were usually more correct than the interpretations his contemporaries made of their own experimental work. That was because he not only had tremendous knowledge, but he put it together properly, synthesizing answers where others had said there were none. If he has ever been proved substantially wrong, in any regard, it would be hard to demonstrate. Thus the microscope waited for two god-forsaken centuries for the human microscope that was necessary to its completion.

The question before science not long ago was, "How can you make a picture of a particle that is too small to reflect visible light?" The answer of pedantry was that it couldn't be done. The limitations which encompass the corner studio, preventing the photographer from using any "wavelengths" but those of light and heat in making pictures, were cheerfully accepted by conformist science as its own limitations.

The tremendously short "wavelength" of the electron is employed in the making of electron-microscope pictures, pictures of light and shadow (or rather, of less electrons and more electrons passed through the object photographed) corresponding to the open spaces and the component particles. The electron-microscope is purely a matter of penetration power, therefore, depending far more upon the penetrative quality of the beam,

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than upon the size of particles (otherwise stated "wavelength") employed. The fact that particles responding readily to ferro-magnetic fields are used, makes the focussing a problem in magnetic manipulations, not subject to the types of abberation so troublesome to optics. The silhouette type of photography thus achieved is quite elementary.

Out in the future of optics lies its greatest field. Today the principles of radar have extended the arbitrary "visible range" into the higher radio frequencies. Ultra-violet and thermal ray photography have been of some use. The highest frequencies, as represented by the electron, have been touched in photography and micro-photography Radar has been employed to reach the moon.

It is hard to understand why the implications of radar for biological investigation have not been touched. Radar frequencies have the penetrative power and all the other necessary requisites to the production of much more satisfactory shadow pictures than are attainable by X-ray. X-ray is so finicky that many experienced technicians have difficulty in obtaining good pictures in many instances, and there is much more trouble, oftentimes, in reading even the best of X-ray photographs. High radio frequencies, on the other hand, are much more perfect in the production of detailed studies at close range. Think how much of the skull-duggery and the quackery of the healing arts would be removed by radio photography. Consider also the implications for physiology (life-processes in the being) and for anatomy, if this idea were carried a step farther and a radio-microscope produced. The day is not far off when man may look upon the marvels of his own innards, watching the valves of the circulatory system gently oscillating, seeing the pancreas pour out its juices, the stomach at work, the undulations of peristalsis, the movement of the lungs. By differential absorption ratios, it should be simplicity itself to see the processes of early cancer.

Yet, in the entire range of energies, man has not touched a penny's worth of the treasures of extended optics or of microscopics. What Schroedinger has mused upon the use of directed and focussed streams of magnetism. What Edison has dreamed about focussing and directing gravitational quanta. What brains have addled themselves about the employment of beams of Hertzian energies, translated into light. What long-wave genius has ever bothered to mark out the possibilities of "seeing" by ordinary radio wave frequencies.

The penetrating power is greater with energy associations as the associations grow less massive. The flow of gravity is not perceptibly modified by the interposition of many feet of material above the observer. Magnetic energy may be thus damped to some extent, but not filtered out. Hertzian waves are still very penetrating, as are long and short radio waves. In light this penetrative power is almost completely lost, but when the aggregate of energy has the mass of the X-ray,

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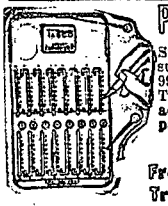

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penetration begins again, for totally different reasons. The mass of the association is now such that it cannot slip through, but bludgeons its way through, causing considerable ruction in its passing. This sort of penetrative power vastly increases as the scale is mounted to the cosmic ray and the electron.

When beams of pure ferro-magnetism are controlled by man, even the electron, which is too compact to be porous to this energy and is therefore moved along by it,* may become visible. Then it will be *seen* that every atom is individualistic to some extent, every electron has its own individual mass, each proton varies from the next in its intimate structure.

Beams of Hertzian waves will discriminate between the individual molecules of viruses. They may be used to determine the fitness of spermatozoa and ova to be allowed to fuse. They may be used in choosing between possible new species of plants and animals. Perhaps the unmatched uniqueness of the plant life found on the islands in the eastern Atlantic (still living, probably survivals of the Atlantean culture) may be matched again.

Not a question of whether the ultra-ultra-ultra microscope may come, but a question of what man will make out of it when it does come. Like the atomic bomb? Yes, but of more intimate, far-reaching and final significance.

*examples: electric current, acceleration of free electrons by magnetic field, etc.

CAREER OF A CURSED CAR

★ By VINCENT GADDIS ★

IT WAS on the morning of June 28, 1914, that a nervous, pale-faced youth, tightly grasping a revolver concealed in his clothing, tensely watched the slow approach of a vivid red automobile along the crowded street in Sarajevo, Bosnia. In the rear seat of the car sat Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife. The royal couple bowed and smiled at the cheering, excited spectators waving flags and shouting on both sides of the procession.

As the red car came abreast, the youth raised his arm and fired. The car stopped. The assassin was seized by soldiers who had been standing at attention nearby. But the bullets had performed their deadly mission, and the archduke and duchess were dead, their blood staining the red cushions of the crimson car to a deeper hue. Echoes of the shots reverberated in the capitals of Europe and served as the pretext for starting the great struggle of the first World War.

Even before its arrival in Bosnia, the archduke's auto with its flaming blood color had been termed a "devil car" by the peasants of Austria. Now,

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with the assassination releasing its rising tide of destruction and death, the death car was stored in the governor's garage in Sarajevo. Its subsequent career, traced by European writers during the years between the two great wars, is an astonishing account of mysterious accidents ending with a startling death toll. Perhaps the superstitious peasants were right! For if ever an object of steel and wood and rubber bore with it a subtle curse, it was this car that played a tragic role in the opening scene of history's first world-wide war.

Six weeks after the assassination, General Potiorek, leader of the Austrian Southern Army, decided to take the car to the scene of battle. The day he reached the front, his army suffered a defeat and was forced to retreat. The general came back in disgrace. He returned the car to the garage, and later went insane.

Months later two staff officers were forced to use the car. It was checked, found to be in perfect condition, and the trip began. The road was smooth and free from bumps. Suddenly the car swerved from the road, went over a ditch, and struck two peasants working in a field. They were instantly killed. The driver later reported to his superior officers that the steering wheel of the auto had turned of its own accord despite his attempts to hold it.

Another chauffeur, one of the best in the army, was assigned to the staff officers for their return trip. All went well until they were a few miles from their base. Then, on a straight road, in bright daylight, the auto skidded and crashed into a tree, killing the chauffeur.

Again the car was stored in a garage. Three years passed by. The war continued, and autos became more and more scarce. Finally, General Sarkotic, military governor of Sarajevo, had the car removed and overhauled. Special attention was given to the steering equipment by the mechanics, but nothing wrong with it could be discovered. Then, on the first day the general ordered it into use, it struck and killed two farmers who were pushing an ox-cart along the side of the road. The chauffeur, who spent six months in the hospital as a result of the accident, told the general that the steering wheel had suddenly turned against his will.

The car was again overhauled and put into use. For several weeks the general used it on short trips, but it would often suddenly stop for no apparent reason. The best mechanics that the army could provide examined every inch of the machine without success. Finally the general sent it back to Sarajevo.

WHEN the Austrian army was forced to retreat from the city, the new Yugo-Slav governor, knowing nothing about the alleged curse, wondered why such a beautiful car had been left behind. He ordered it prepared for his personal use. Within two months time the governor had three accidents. A week after the third accident, the

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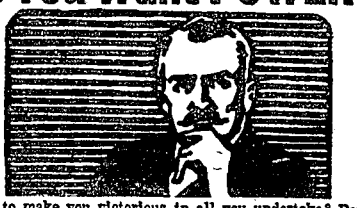

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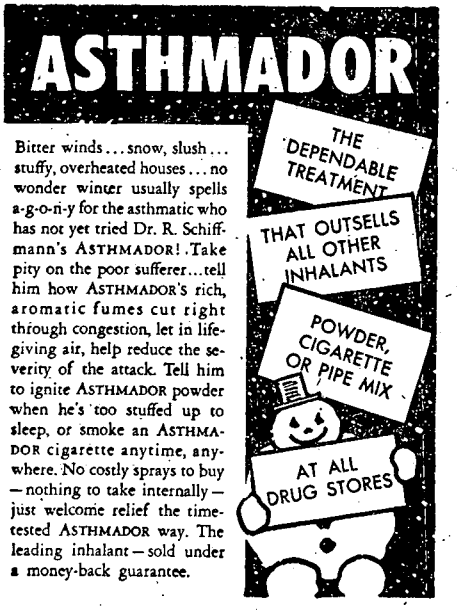

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auto crashed into a tree, and the governor was seriously injured. When the war came to an end, the governor was in a hospital and the "devil car" was in a garage.

Autos continued to be scarce after the armistice, and the car was offered for sale. A Yugo-Slav physician, Dr. Srskic, purchased it. At first he lost patients because the peasants feared the car so greatly, but weeks passed by and nothing happened. One night the doctor failed to return to his home. Searchers found his car over-turned on a smooth, straight road. Under the auto was the dead body of the doctor.

The car was again offered for sale. It was pointed out that although the car had been in many wrecks, it had never been badly damaged. It had the almost uncanny ability to always emerge from accidents fairly intact. After some months, the car was finally sold to a Bosnian landowner who purchased it on a dare. He drove it a short time, sold it to a man named Peter Sveatitch, then committed suicide.

Peter Sveatitch's chauffeur had worked for his employer for eight years without an accident, but he had not been driving a "devil car." A few days after his new purchase, Sveatitch and several friends went for a drive. The car was under perfect control and responded to every touch of the wheel. Another car was noticed coming from the opposite direction, and the chauffeur kept the car close to the side of the road. Suddenly the car seemed to leap into the path of the oncoming auto. There was a headlong collision. One person was killed and four injured.

Sveatitch had enough. He had the car repaired, sold it to a man unaware of its history, and the new owner shipped it to his home in Vienna. Soon afterwards he undertook to drive it through the Dolmiten Pass. What actually happened will never be known. The Austrian newspapers described it as the worst accident that had ever occurred in the pass. It was another headon crash. One car had been knocked over a cliff; the "devil car" had hit against the side of a mountain. The owner had been killed.

As usual, the slight damage to the car was repaired, and after passing through the hands of several dealers, it reappeared in Bosnia one year later. One day a Hungarian, named Hirschfield, who happened to be passing through the country, saw it and bought it. He shipped it to Transylvania, and, knowing of its history, he secretly painted it blue and planned to sell it at a good profit.

One day, before the sale could be made, he decided to take a number of friends to a wedding being held about eighty miles away. Only one car was large enough to hold them all—the "devil car." Hirschfield told his guests of the car's tragic past, but they insisted that it be used for the journey. Finally they started. After traveling some miles, the car, for the last time, suddenly leaped in front of an approaching auto. Both of

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the cars were reduced to twisted masses of wreckage. The "devil car" had at last destroyed itself, taking with it the lives of five persons.

Involved in eleven accidents, the cursed car that started a war had killed sixteen persons and injured eight. Its story is a study in crimson—its color symbolized by its trail of blood.

THE FOX GODDESS

★ By H. R. STANTON ☆

THERE is a strange belief among the superstitious lower-class Japanese women that they may suddenly be metamorphised into a fox, never to return to human form again. How this legend sprung into existence is not known, but it was widespread in the early Middle Ages.

In the village temples small bowls of rice are placed before a tiny shrine on appointed days to feed the dreaded fox. Theatres, geisha houses and hotels in particular, build their own small fox shrines, where offerings of food and paper symbols of propitation are reverently laid before the miniature porcelain foxes ranged about the inner sanctuary: If the Fox Goddess is not satisfied in this way, women live in the fear that the animal's spirit may enter their bodies between the tips of the fingers and fingernails and then take possession of them.

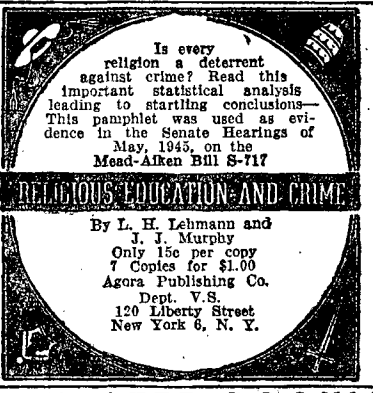
The people of the country live in such dread of the animal that people owning foxes are socially separate from the rest of their community. No one except another fox-owner ever wishes to have his children marry into a fox-owning family. When a wedding is being arranged between persons living at a distance and unacquainted with the details of their respective family histories, there are three questions to be tactfully determined. "Is there a possible taint of leprosy in the family?" "Is there tuberculosis?" "Is this a fox-owning family?" When these three possible hindrances are eliminated, the marriage arrangements may proceed.

The wily fox is to the Japanese a symbol far worse than our native American "boogey man."

THE SUNKEN TREASURE

★ By SANDY MILLER ☆

LYING somewhere in the vicinity of Erie, a small city on Lake Erie, is the wreck of the once-proud *City of Detroit*, which went down in September of 1873, and took with her in her hold a fortune of copper bars, valued at $100,000. As if this isn't enough to egg an adventuresome soul on to seek out her remains, there is also a like amount in specie nestling in the purser's safe to be claimed. It's a safe bet that the Lake will not give up her captor so easily, for no one has as yet found any trace of her or her crew.



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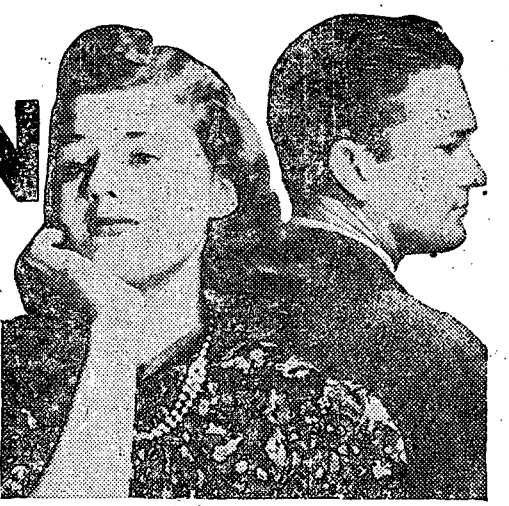

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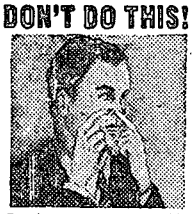

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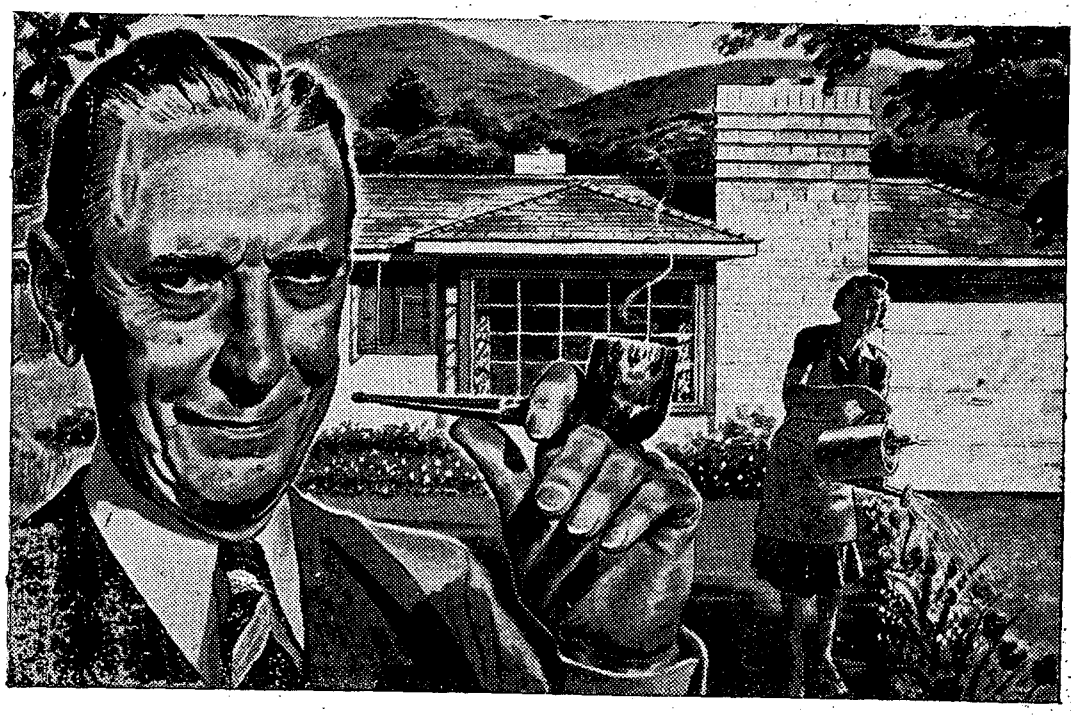

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(The average American today has a choice of just going where "his feet take him", or choosing wisely the course to follow. Let's skip ahead 10 years, and take a look at John Jones—and listen to him . . .)

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